

## Turkish-Russian relations in light of recent conflicts: Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh

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SWP Research Paper

*Galip Dalay*

# Turkish-Russian Relations in Light of Recent Conflicts

Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh



Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik  
German Institute for  
International and Security Affairs

Centre for Applied Turkey Studies **CATS**

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- Syria is central to the current shape of Turkey-Russia relations. It offers a model of partnership for both countries in a context where their interests are competitive. However, the Syrian-centric cooperation between Turkey and Russia is also special and is thus unlikely to be replicated elsewhere due to structural constraints and contextual nuances.
- The limits of the Syrian-style model of cooperation between Ankara and Moscow can be observed in Libya as well as Nagorno-Karabakh.
- Even though the institutional and elite ownership of Turkey's Western relations has weakened, no similar institutional basis exists in Turkey's relations with Russia. As such, the current Ankara-Moscow axis is to a great extent defined by the personal ties between the countries' leaders and geopolitical imperatives. However, if the current shape of relations endures much longer, these personalised relations will gain structural foundations.
- A major problem for Turkey in its relations with Russia remains the asymmetry, even if interdependent, in favour of Moscow. Yet, the nature of asymmetry is dynamic and subject to change, as Turkey has engaged in what can be termed dependency reduction on Russia, both geopolitically and structurally (energy-wise).
- Developments at the broader international level, a new administration in the US, and rising tension between Ukraine and Russia indicate that Turkey would face more constraints and higher costs for its hitherto geopolitical balancing act between the West and Russia.
- The close relations in recent years between Ankara and Moscow also point to the need for Turkey and the West to redefine the nature of their relations, as the Cold War framework of Turkey-US relations and the accession framework of Turkish-European relations increasingly appear to be ill-suited to the present realities.

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*Galip Dalay*

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## **Turkish-Russian Relations in Light of Recent Conflicts. Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh**

Turkey is recalibrating its foreign and regional policy at a time when the Middle East is undergoing a major transformation and restructuring. Likewise, Russia appears to be reformulating its place in the international system at a time when the nature and contours of the post–Cold War system are becoming less and less recognisable. Therefore, both Turkey and Russia are redefining their regional and international roles at the same time.

From the war in Georgia (2008) to the Ukrainian crisis and the annexation of Crimea (2014), Russia has been reasserting itself in the post–Cold War international system for some time. It is seeking recognition as a great power as well as parity with the United States (US) – and hence a redefinition of the framework of US-Russia relations. Arguably, it was within the context of the Syrian conflict – and later the Libyan and Nagorno-Karabakh conflicts – that Russia's goals manifested themselves most clearly. Similarly, it is primarily through Turkey's policy on the Middle East that Ankara asserts its regional and international role. From Syria to Libya, and Iraq to the Eastern Mediterranean, Turkey is pursuing a highly active and interventionist foreign policy.

It is not only the growing roles of Turkey and Russia in the Middle East that are attracting international scrutiny. It is also the nature of their engagements and the competitive – if not adversarial – cooperation in this region that have surprised many analysts and observers. What drives Turkish-Russian relations? How to account for their increasingly close relations in the Middle East and beyond? How have their engagements on regional conflicts reshaped their bilateral relations? And how are these relations likely to evolve? This research paper examines these questions through the lenses of the conflicts in Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh. The latter is not geographically located in the Middle East. However, in their bilateral engagements, Ankara and Moscow appear to have established close connections between this conflict in the South Caucasus and their cooperation and competition in other conflict zones in the Middle East.



Syria is central to the current shape of Turkey-Russia relations. It offers a model of partnership for both countries in a context where their interests compete. In other words, through the Syrian conflict, Ankara and Moscow have discovered the value and effectiveness of bilateral engagements and limited regional multilateralism as a form of dealing with conflicts in which both actors are involved. However, the Syrian-centric cooperation between Turkey and Russia is also special and is thus unlikely to be replicated elsewhere due to structural constraints and contextual nuances. The limits of the Syrian-style model of cooperation between Moscow and Ankara can be observed in Libya as well as Nagorno-Karabakh.

In spite of these limitations, an accounting of both actors' increasingly close relations in recent years has become a challenge for analysts. Unlike Moscow, Ankara has to pay a price for these close relations – being removed from the F-35 fighter jet programme led by the US and slapped with the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) for its purchase of the Russian-made S-400 systems, in addition to the growing strains in Ankara's relations with the West. Therefore, it is even more crucial to elucidate Turkey's motives in seeking closer engagements with Moscow. Broadly speaking, there are three dominant explanatory accounts for why Turkey is seeking cooperation: political (discontent with the West), systemic, and personality-centric frameworks. The boundaries between these different accounts are not clear-cut. All of them shed light on important aspects of these ties, however none of them alone can provide an overarching account of these relations.

Different accounts are better suited for explaining the different stages of these relations. For instance, Turkey's discontent with the West – coupled with the systemic changes in the Middle East's relations with international powers – helps to explain the formation of closer relations between the two actors in mid-2016. However, the personal rapport between Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Vladimir Putin has been crucial in keeping these relations on track in the face of many crises and challenges since then. In fact, given the weakness of the institutional agency in this relationship, it is not clear to what extent what we discuss as Ankara-Moscow relations are fundamentally Putin-Erdoğan relations. Both actors are the ultimate decision-makers in their respective countries, therefore this distinction at this stage does not mean

much policy-wise, but it is crucial when projecting the future course of these relations.

A major problem for Turkey in its relations with Russia remains the asymmetry, even if interdependent, in favour of Moscow. Yet, the nature of asymmetry is dynamic and subject to change, as Turkey has engaged in what can be termed “dependency reduction” on Russia, both geopolitically and structurally (in terms of energy dependency on Russia).

Finally, as a result of the increasingly close relations between Ankara and Moscow (coupled with the growing gap between Turkey and the West, both in the domestic and foreign policy realms), the nature, meaning, and content of Turkish-Western relations are undergoing major changes, and Turkey's place in the broader Western system is increasingly being questioned. Going forward, these developments, in return, will trigger more calls both in the West and in Turkey to redefine the framework and meaning of Turkish-Western relations, as the Cold War framework of Turkey-US relations and the accession framework of Turkish-European relations increasingly appear to be ill-suited to the present realities.

# The Syrian Conflict: From Russia's "Afghanistan" to Turkey's "Syria Syndrome"

No single issue has shaped Turkish-Russian relations in recent decades as much as the crisis in Syria. It gave birth to a partnership model between both within the context of a crisis in which there were adversarial interests. Whenever there is a new geopolitical crisis in which both Ankara and Moscow are involved, they have almost impulsively tried to apply this model to the crisis in question, only to discover its limits. In other words, though the Syrian crisis is centrally responsible for the present shape of Turkish-Russian relations, it is also a unique crisis, and the dynamics of these relations are unlikely to be easily replicated in other contexts.

## Context

Russia came to Syria with the lessons learnt from the Libya intervention in 2011. There seems to be a near consensus among analysts of Russia's Middle East policy about the centrality of the Libyan affair in shaping (then-Prime Minister) President Putin's approach to the events that occurred as part of the Arab uprisings.<sup>1</sup> Russia's abstention on United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1973, tabled on 17 March 2011, paved the way for a military intervention led by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the subsequent toppling of the Qaddafi regime in Libya. Russia believes that the West misused this resolution for the purpose of regime change — a mandate that Russia contended was not provided by this resolution. These events convinced Russia that a similar scenario should not be allowed to occur in Syria. Moreover, Russia also

came to Syria with its "Afghanistan syndrome" in mind,<sup>2</sup> which was based on a conviction among Russian elites that the Syrian campaign should not be permitted to lead to mission creep and result in a quagmire for Russia: Many analysts and decision-makers in the West, including then-US President Barack Obama, believed that it would.<sup>3</sup> These two narratives significantly shaped Russia's early Syria campaign — including its determination not to get involved in the Syrian civil war on the ground except for limited engagements.

In contrast, at the initial stage, Turkey looked at the Syrian uprising in 2011 with optimism during the early phase of the Arab uprisings, believing that it would leave its heavy imprint on the post-Assad political order in Syria as well as the new order that was to emerge as a result of the Arab uprisings across the region. There was a stark difference between the Turkish and Russian approaches to Syria: Whereas regime change was a red line for Russia, it was the most important policy priority for Turkey until approximately 2015, particularly after Turkey's initial efforts to convince Bashar al-Assad to undertake certain reforms had failed. Yet, the developments on the ground did not turn out the way Turkey wanted. First, with the benefit of hindsight, the US commitment to regime change in Syria appeared to be half-hearted at best. Second, with the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), for many actors, particularly Western ones, the priority in Syria

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>3</sup> "Obama Warns Russia's Putin of 'Quagmire' in Syria", *Reuters*, 3 October 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-airstrikes/obama-warns-russias-putin-of-quagmire-in-syria-idUSKCN0RW0W220151003> (accessed 8 September 2020).

<sup>1</sup> Dmitri Trenin, *What Is Russia up to in the Middle East?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018).

rapidly shifted from regime change to the war on terror — on ISIS to be precise. Third, when ISIS besieged Kobani, a Syrian Kurdish town, from September 2014 to February 2015 — an episode during which the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) put up a fierce fight — the military partnership between the YPG and the US Central Command (CENTCOM) was born. The more the major powers began to approach Syria through the lens of the war on terror, the more the YPG gained international prominence and control over territory in the northern part of the country bordering Turkey. The YPG's tacit cooperation with Damascus, a flexible approach towards regional and international powers, including Iran and Russia, and the setting-up of governance structures early on in the areas that it controlled further facilitated its gains during this period. Thus, Turkey has become increasingly concerned about the prospect of having a YPG-dominated Kurdish belt running along most of its border with Syria. Finally, there was the reality of a significant Russian presence to the south of Turkey's borders. All these developments engendered a siege mentality among Turkey's political elites around the period of 2014–2016. Turkey's early optimism and euphoria have faded away.

## Drivers behind Turkish engagement with Russia in Syria

During the early stages of the Arab uprisings, Turkey appeared to be on the winning side, whereas Russia was seen to be on the losing side. In this regard, two dates are important to demonstrate how the fortunes of the Arab uprisings, their proponents, as well as their opponents have changed. In 2012, the region was believed to be on the verge of a new regional order — a proto-regional order was in the making through regime changes in several Arab states as a result of the waves of protests. The presidents of the following countries had either stepped down or were toppled or killed: Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia in 2011, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt in 2011, Muammar Qaddafi of Libya in 2011, and Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen in 2012. The collapse of the Assad regime in Syria was also seen as imminent in Turkey. This possibility boosted Turkey's confidence and belief that the region was on the verge of a new order. In this scenario, Turkey regarded Russia and Iran as being on the losing side of the regional transformation.

Yet, this picture dramatically changed in 2013. Domestically — from the Gezi Park protests, which started in late May of that year, to the power struggle between the government and the Gülenists,<sup>4</sup> which fully came to the surface in December of the same year and then culminated in a coup attempt on 15 July 2016 — a series of events ruptured the government's confidence and rendered it more inward-looking. Regionally, on 3 July 2013, a bloody coup ousted Egypt's democratically elected Muslim Brotherhood-led government;<sup>5</sup> in August, the Assad regime used chemical weapons with impunity<sup>6</sup> — despite Obama's designation of the use of chemical weapons as the US red line for military action;<sup>7</sup> in Tunisia, the Ennahda movement chose accommodation, in 2014, with the *ancien regime*; Libya's domestic chaos only deepened in 2014–2015.

To put it starkly, if 2012 represented the emergence of a proto-regional order that was Turkey-friendly, 2013 represented the unravelling of this proto-order. Therefore, by the time of the jet incident between Turkey and Russia — Turkey shot down a Russian jet violating its airspace on 24 November

4 The Gülenists refers to a socio-religious group that previously had a strong presence within the state structure and an extensive international network of businesses as well as education, media, and similar organisations. It utilised its presence within the state structure to advance the group's agenda. For a long time, particularly during the struggle with Turkey's previous Kemalist establishment, the group allied itself with the government — which in return allowed the group to further enhance and deepen its presence within the state. Later, this alliance fell apart. Utilising primarily its presence within the state, the group engaged in a fierce power struggle with the government. This process reached a climax when the group engineered a coup attempt, which failed, to topple the government on 15 July 2016. Currently, the group is designated as a terrorist organisation in Turkey and its leader, Fethullah Gülen, is residing in the United States — which has become a source of great tension between Turkey and the United States.

5 David Kirkpatrick, "Army Ousts Egypt's President; Morsi Is Taken into Military Custody", *The New York Times*, 3 July 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/04/world/middleeast/egypt.html> (accessed 8 September 2020).

6 Romain Houeix, "A History of the Syria Chemical Weapons 'Red Line'", *France 24*, 14 April 2018, <https://www.france24.com/en/20180414-syria-chemical-weapons-red-line-obama-macron-assad-russia-usa-france-idlib> (accessed 8 September 2020).

7 Ibid.

2015<sup>8</sup> — Turkey's Syria policy and priorities had already undergone a major transformation. Instead of the narrative of a new regional order in which Turkey was supposed to play a leading role as an “order-instituting actor”,<sup>9</sup> as Turkey's then-Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu would put it, in this new period, the language of national security and security threats dominated Turkey's Syria policy. In other words, this series of events magnified Turkey's sense of national insecurity.

**Russia's cooperation with Turkey gave more international legitimacy to the Russian-designed Astana and Sochi processes.**

The jet crisis and ensuing aftermath demonstrated how isolated and fragile Turkey's position in Syria had become and how essential it was for Turkey to engage with Russia if it wanted to affect the course of events on the ground. Thus, Turkey's understanding that it could only re-enter the Syrian scene as a result of a deal with Russia — coupled with the apparent Russian calculation that it could design both the course of the conflict and the political process more effectively by way of engagement with Turkey — formed the background for the rapprochement between the two actors. To put it briefly, Turkey's discontent with the Syria policy of the US (including the increasingly growing gap between both actors' threat perceptions), the prioritisation of rolling back Syrian Kurdish gains over the toppling of the Assad regime, and the primacy of Russia in north-western Syria (the site of two out of Turkey's three military operations into Syria) motivated Turkey to seek a cooperative framework with Russia to address its aspirations. Similarly, given that Turkey was one of the major backers of the Syrian opposition, Russia's cooperation with Turkey gave more international legitimacy to the Russian-designed Astana and Sochi processes on the Syrian imbroglio. Likewise, through cooperation with Turkey in Syria, Russia forged over-all closer relations with Turkey, which in return

drove further wedges between Turkey and the US and created discontent within NATO.

## Mechanism of cooperation and competition in Syria

With this awareness, Turkey and Russia mended their ties in mid-2016 to set aside the tension that had ensued from the jet incident — this incident reduced the room for manoeuvre by Turkey and its allied Syrian opposition groups in the Syrian theatre. In this respect, Moscow's early stance against the coup attempt in Turkey on 15 July 2016 significantly changed the nature of their relations for the better. Less than 40 days after the coup attempt, Turkey launched its first cross-border operation into Syria — the Euphrates Shield operation — with Russia's blessing.<sup>10</sup> Focusing on the ISIS-run areas between Jarablus, Azaz, and al-Bab in north-western Syria, the most immediate objective of this operation was to clear Turkey's border of ISIS — the immediate operational goal of this military offensive. However, by taking over al-Bab, this operation also prevented the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) from creating complete territorial contiguity between its three different cantons in northern Syria (preventing the then PYD-run Afrin region in north-west Syria from being territorially merged with the PYD's enclaves in north-east Syria)<sup>11</sup> — this formed the strategic goal of the same operation. Likewise, with Moscow's green light, Ankara launched another military offensive against the PYD-YPG in Afrin on 20 January 2018.<sup>12</sup> With this operation, Turkey took over Afrin and almost completely terminated the PYD-YPG's presence in the north-western part of Syria — except for small pockets of Tel Rifat and Manbij.

Russia's facilitation of Turkey's re-entry onto the Syrian scene, thereby enabling Ankara to attain its operational and strategic goals, incentivised Turkey to take part in Russia-engineered processes concerning Syria. In return, Turkey's participation legitimised the

8 “Turkey's Downing of Russian Warplane — What We Know”, *BBC News*, 1 December 2015, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-34912581> (accessed 8 September 2020).

9 Ahmet Davutoglu, “Principles of Turkish Foreign Policy and Regional Political Structuring”, Turkey Policy Brief Series (TEPAV, 2012).

10 “Turkey Ends ‘Euphrates Shield’ Operation in Syria”, *Al Jazeera*, 30 March 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/3/30/turkey-ends-euphrates-shield-operation-in-syria> (accessed 10 September 2020).

11 Galip Dalay, *What Next for Turkey in Syria?* (Doha: Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, 27 March 2017).

12 “Syria: Turkey War Planes Launch Strikes on Afrin”, *BBC News*, 20 January 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-42759944> (accessed 10 September 2020).

Russian-led initiatives (Astana and Sochi processes). This participation has also reduced the burden and costs of the civil war for Russia, as these processes restructured the war in a way that made it easier for the Assad regime to recover more territories from the opposition with relatively low cost. In this respect, on 20 December 2016, the foreign ministers of Turkey, Russia, and Iran met in Moscow to launch a trilateral process on Syria, which later came to be dubbed the Astana process.<sup>13</sup> Through this trilateral setting, the three actors held 14 rounds of meetings within the framework of the Astana process before later convening the Sochi conference on the political process in Syria on January 30, 2018.<sup>14</sup> Apart from this trilateral framework, when it comes to the different sets of disputes over Idlib province, Moscow and Ankara have usually operated within a bilateral framework, leaving Iran out for the most part. In other words, in the case of Idlib, the Astana trio has been largely replaced by the Astana duo. Therefore, Turkish-Russian engagements in Syria have occurred through structured trilateral and bilateral processes.

Despite these cooperative frameworks, Turkish-Russian policies in Syria have remained inherently competitive and prone to conflict — both actors support different sides in the conflict. In addition, Russia wants the Assad regime to establish control over as much of Syria as possible, ideally all of Syria, whereas Turkey's presence in Syria increasingly appears to be long-term, not temporary. Plus, according to the Sochi Accord of 2018 between Moscow and Ankara, Turkey was supposed to deal with the question of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) — a group composed of former Syrian al-Qaeda members that was designated as a terrorist organisation by the United Nations (UN) — and force it to withdraw from the areas that it controls in Idlib. Turkey has thus far failed to honour this pledge. Moreover, instead of counter-terrorism, Ankara appears to be pursuing a de-radicalisation and transformation agenda with this group. Neither side, but particularly Russia, has shied away from drawing red lines when their interests were being threatened. The most obvious case in

point was when the Russia-Syria regime killed 36 Turkish soldiers on 28 February 2020 during the confrontation over Idlib.<sup>15</sup> During these flare-ups, there have been clear patterns in the policies of both Russia and Turkey. First, both actors have pursued a policy of military consolidation (or driving up costs for the other side) on the ground. Second, these escalatory cycles were then de-escalated through Erdoğan-Putin summitries. These summitries culminated in new deals or what can be regarded as cease-fire politics, and hence new shaky status quos, which were easily breached during subsequent confrontations. This illustrates the "fragility and flexibility"<sup>16</sup> or the testing and sustaining dynamics of Turkish-Russian engagements in Syria and beyond — in the sense that the incompatibilities of Turkish and Russian aspirations and interests have rendered their ties fragile. However, they have illustrated sufficient flexibility and agility in managing these incompatibilities (hence the fragility of their relations), culminating in the crumbling of ties.

Finally, Russia has maintained an overall upper hand in its engagement with Turkey in Syria. There are three factors that have worked in favour of Russia in the context of Syria and created asymmetry in Moscow-Ankara relations there: Russia's military superiority, the long Turkish border with Syria (vulnerability to the refugee influx), and the Kurds (Turkey's Achilles heel).

## Implications

As put forward above, Russia directly facilitated Turkey's two military offensives (Operation Euphrates Shield August 2016 – March 2017 and the Afrin Operation January – March 2018) into Syria and indirectly facilitated the third.<sup>17</sup>

15 "Erdoğan açıkladı: İdlib'de şehit sayısı 36'a yükseldi" [Erdoğan Announced: The Number of Our Martyrs Rose to 36], *Karar Gazetesi* (a liberal conservative daily), 29 February 2020, <https://www.karar.com/erdogan-acikladi-idlibde-sehit-sayisi-36a-yukseldi-1546876> (accessed 11 September 2020).

16 See Maxim Suchkov, "Russia and Turkey: Flexible Rivals" (Moscow: Carnegie Moscow Center, 20 March 2020), <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/81330> (accessed 11 September 2020); also, see, Charles Thépaut, *The Astana Process: A Flexible but Fragile Showcase for Russia*, Policy Analysis (The Washington Institute, 28 April 2020).

17 To clarify, once Turkey pushed the PYD/YPG from the north-western side of the Euphrates through the Euphrates

13 "Astana Joint Statement by Iran, Russia, Turkey: in Full", *Al Jazeera*, 24 January 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/1/24/astana-joint-statement-by-iran-russia-turkey-in-full> (accessed 10 September 2020).

14 Anne Bernard, "Syrian Peace Talks in Russia: 1,500 Delegates, Mostly Pro-Assad", *The New York Times*, 30 January 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/30/world/middleeast/syria-russia-sochi-talks.html> (accessed 10 September 2020).



Moreover, both the Astana and Sochi processes are essentially premised on a Russian-Turkish understanding with Iranian participation. Given Turkey's status as the main sponsor of the Syrian opposition, its presence gave legitimacy and international acceptance to these processes. Yet, these processes have effectively reflected Russia's reading of the crisis and its vision for the solution. Through Astana, Russia has cut the connections between a ceasefire, de-escalation, and the political process.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, through the Sochi conference, it seems that Russia (as well as the regime and Iran) has cut the link between the political process and a political transition.<sup>19</sup> Instead, the political process is conceived of as including some fine-tuning to the regime's 2012 constitution as well as preparatory work for a sham electoral process.<sup>20</sup> The net loser of these processes is the Syrian opposition. During the Astana and Sochi processes, the opposition has increasingly come to be seen as Turkey's proxy – Turkey's deployment of Syrian fighters in Libya was an important demonstration in this respect (Russia similarly deployed the pro-regime Syrian fighters to fight on behalf of the Libyan National Army (LNA) – which in return has reduced their legitimacy, both among the Syrian population

as well as internationally. The other group that can be described as a relative loser is the Syrian Kurdish YPG. Through its engagement with Russia and participation in Russia-led processes, Turkey has been able to return onto the Syrian scene, undertake its Euphrates Shield and Afrin operations, and create a Turkish-controlled zone in the north-western part of Syria – and, with Moscow's indirect, enabling role, a limited zone in north-eastern Syria. In other words, through the Astana and Sochi processes, Turkish-Russian engagements in Syria have restructured the war in a way that has led to the Syrian opposition losing legitimacy and territory and the Assad regime recovering more territory. Turkey attained some of its major goals, particularly vis-à-vis the Syrian Kurdish PYD, and Russia emerged as the primary power broker in the country. To illustrate the magnitude of the opposition's loss: Of the four de-escalation zones – Eastern Ghouta, Homs, Daraa, and Idlib – that were established as part of the Astana process in May 2017 and designed to be zones in which all hostilities were to cease – only one (Idlib) exists today.<sup>21</sup> And this one is also under heavy pressure from the regime and the Russians.

### **Moscow-Ankara-Tehran cooperation in Syria has largely come at the expense of the West's role and influence there.**

Corollary to this, Russian-Turkish engagement in Syria has had spillover effects on other areas, hence paving the way for the deepening of overall bilateral relations. The most obvious case in point is Turkey's purchase of Russian S-400 missile systems in 2017.<sup>22</sup> It is unlikely that Turkey would have bought these missile systems in the absence of Moscow-Ankara cooperation in Syria. This purchase has become one of the major points of friction between Turkey and the US. In fact, the US has removed Turkey from the F-35 fighter jet programme in response.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, through Syria, Moscow and Ankara have undergone a

Shield and Afrin operations, Ankara then further increased its pressure on the United States to greenlight its military offensive into north-eastern Syria. Certainly, Donald Trump, as a person, has enabled Turkey's operation. However, if Turkey would not have already pushed the YPG from the north-western part of Syria, it is unlikely that it would have then prioritised the launch of an operation against the YPG/PYD in north-eastern Syria – for a long time Ankara was fixated on the presence of the YPG/PYD in the north-western part of the country. Therefore, it was the idea of "mission accomplished" in north-western Syria that enabled Turkey to turn its firepower onto north-eastern Syria.

<sup>18</sup> Galip Dalay, "From Astana to Sochi: How De-escalation Allowed Assad to Return to War", *The Middle East Eye*, 20 February 2018, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/astana-sochi-how-de-escalation-allowed-assad-return-war> (accessed 13 September 2020).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> "Rocky Syria Talks in Russia End, Ignore Key Opposition Demands", *Reuters*, 30 January 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-congress/rocky-syria-talks-in-russia-end-ignore-key-opposition-demands-idUSKBN1FJ0WJ> (accessed 13 September 2020); "A Disappointing Gathering in Sochi", *The Jordan Times*, 31 January 2018, <http://www.jordantimes.com/opinion/editorial/disappointing-gathering-sochi> (accessed 13 September 2020).

<sup>21</sup> Gregor Jaecke and David Labude, *De-escalation Zones in Syria*, Country Report (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, June 2020).

<sup>22</sup> "Turkey Signs Deal to Get Russian S-400 Air Defence Missiles", *BBC News*, 12 September 2017, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-41237812> (accessed 13 September 2020).

<sup>23</sup> "US Removes Turkey from F-35 Fighter Jet Programme", *BBC News*, 17 July 2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-49023115> (accessed 13 September 2020).

learning process. Whenever there has been a conflict in which both actors are involved, they have explored ways to see whether they can apply their Syria experience — or learning processes from this experience — to the new contexts. They tried this for the Libyan conflict, though less successfully and skilfully. Similarly, Turkey has tried to initiate an Astana-style bilateral track with Russia on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict,<sup>24</sup> yet the Russians have rebuffed this outreach by Turkey.

Finally, Turkish-Russian cooperation in Syria has helped both sides to achieve some of their major goals and aspirations as well as increase their influence and ability — along with that of Iran — in charting the course of the civil war. In return, this has decreased the role and influence of the Western powers in Syria. Similarly, the Astana and Sochi processes have hollowed out the UN-led and Western-supported Geneva process — however, as the Astana process has largely run its course by now, the Geneva track might regain more relevance for the political process. To give an example, through the Astana process, Russia has largely taken the de-escalation subject off the table in Geneva.<sup>25</sup> Thus, Moscow-Ankara-Tehran cooperation in Syria has largely come at the expense of the West's role and influence in Syria.

**24** "Turkey Ready to Work with Russia for Karabakh Peace: Erdoğan", *Hurriyet Daily News*, 23 October 2020, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/erdogan-hopes-to-work-with-russia-in-nagorno-karabakh-solution-159404> (accessed 16 December 2020).

**25** Dalay, "From Astana to Sochi" (see note 18).

# Libya: Turkish Engagement and Its Limits

After Syria, the second regional context in which Turkey and Russia explored a structured engagement was the Libyan imbroglio. Unlike in Syria — where Russia has maintained an overall upper hand with Turkey — in Libya, there was no such asymmetry in relations. Turkey's level of vulnerability vis-à-vis susceptibility to Russia was relatively low. In addition, as Russia often points out, there is a formal invitation by the UN-recognised Syrian regime to legitimise its presence in Syria. Turkey utilised a similar justification for its presence in Libya, which came at the behest of the UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA).<sup>26</sup> However, Turkish-Russian engagement in Libya was limited, both in terms of scope and duration.

## Context

Libya was the first Arab Spring country where uprisings became militarised, leading to a UN-authorised NATO intervention in Libya.<sup>27</sup> Initially, Turkey vocally opposed it.<sup>28</sup> However, once it began to see the Western intervention as inevitable, it quickly changed its position and supported it. In fact, Ankara then saw the benefit that it would have a say in the decision-making process of a NATO intervention, as opposed to

a French-British-US intervention, in which it would have had either limited or no say. Similarly, Russia's abstention on UNSC Resolution 1973 provided UN legitimacy for the NATO mission that toppled the Qaddafi regime. At this stage, both Ankara and Moscow consented to what was essentially a Western policy on Libya. Ankara, in particular, tried to jump on the bandwagon and align itself with this Western policy of regime change in Tripoli.

However since the toppling of the Qaddafi regime, the appetites of both the US and Europe for engagements in Libya have significantly decreased.<sup>29</sup> That opened the way for other actors to fill the vacuum and for the civil wars to become more perilous, as the country was beset with uncontrolled militia violence. In 2015, with temporary Western re-engagement, the UN brokered the Libyan Political Agreement, which gave birth to the UN-recognised GNA.<sup>30</sup> But this did not end the civil war or the belief in a military solution to the conflict held by actors such as the LNA of self-styled Field Marshall Khalifa Haftar. In fact soon afterwards, the country was effectively divided between the Tripoli-based GNA and the Tobruk-based House of Representatives, which is largely controlled by the LNA. Aided by Egypt, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Russia, and believing in a military solution and total victory, the LNA launched a military offensive in April 2019 to take over Tripoli and control the whole of Libya. As the LNA gained ground, it was not only the GNA, but also Turkey's Libya policy that faced the moment of truth. Inaction would have spelt

<sup>26</sup> For a view on how Turkey's Libya policy is inspired by Russia's playbook in Syria, see Tarek Megerisi, "It's Turkey's Libya Now", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 20 May 2020, [https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_its\\_turkeys\\_libya\\_now/](https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_its_turkeys_libya_now/) (accessed 7 November 2020).

<sup>27</sup> Tarek Megerisi, "How Libya Became a Battleground for Foreign Powers", *Newlines Magazine*, 11 October 2020, <https://newlinesmag.com/argument/how-libya-became-a-battleground-for-foreign-powers/> (accessed 7 November 2020).

<sup>28</sup> Saban Kardas, "Turkey on NATO's Role in the MENA: Perspectives from a 'Central Country'" (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012).

<sup>29</sup> See Wolfram Lacher's comment for Radio Free Europe & Radio Liberty, Frud Bezhan, "U.S. Vacuum: How Libya Is Descending into a Russia-Turkey Proxy War", *Radio Free Europe & Radio Liberty*, 21 January 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/u-s-vacuum-how-libya-is-descending-into-a-russia-turkey-proxy-war-/30389900.html> (accessed 8 November 2020).

<sup>30</sup> Megerisi, "How Libya Became a Battleground for Foreign Powers" (see note 27).



defeat both for the GNA and Turkey's policy — it would have been a major blow for Turkey's standing in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Maghreb. In response, Turkey decided to undertake a forceful intervention to protect the GNA and its broader interests in late 2019.

### Drivers behind Turkey's active role and quest for engagement with Russia

Turkey's goals for its decisive Libyan intervention and policy are multifold. Financially, Turkish companies (particularly construction firms) were highly active during the Qaddafi era in Libya<sup>31</sup> — for instance, prior to 2011, there were around 25,000 Turkish workers in Libya.<sup>32</sup> There are many frozen contracts from this era. The question of who controls Tripoli is decisive, particularly as to whether Turkey will get these contracts and payments. On top of this, Ankara also covets a share of Libya's future reconstruction, including a presence in the country's energy and financial sectors. Moreover, the regional political and geopolitical divides that were born out of the Arab Spring are on full display in Libya, where Turkey is engaged in a fierce rivalry with the anti-Arab Spring forces such as the UAE, Egypt, and to a lesser degree Saudi Arabia. Plus, Libya is also the site of a geopolitical confrontation between Turkey and France, as both actors support different sides in the conflict — whereas Turkey supports the GNA, France supports the LNA and projects influence in Libya, the Mediterranean, and North Africa. Through its Libya policy, Ankara is trying not to lose ground in these multi-layered power struggles.<sup>33</sup> Plus, Turkey sees the Libyan imbroglio as part of a broader power play and geopolitical rivalry in the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>34</sup>

31 Ece Goksedef, "Libya, Türkiye'nin yeni dış politika önceliği haline mi geliyor?" [Is Libya Becoming the New Priority of Turkish Foreign Policy?], *BBC Türkçe* (BBC's Turkish service), 3 July 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-dunya-48844835> (accessed 8 November 2020).

32 Ibid.

33 Galip Dalay, "Turkey's Libya Gambit Is Paying Off — for Now", *Middle East Eye*, 19 May 2020, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/turkeys-libya-gambit-paying-now> (accessed 8 November 2020).

34 Galip Dalay, "Libya Conflict: Turkey Is Looking for a 'Third Way' in Sirte", *Middle East Eye*, 21 July 2020, [https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/libya-conflict-turkey-](https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/libya-conflict-turkey-options-)options- (accessed 8 November 2020).

In recent years, Ankara has felt that a new energy and security order is emerging in this region, an order that is centred on close cooperation between Egypt, Israel, Greece, and Cyprus, and from which Turkey is excluded. With its Libya policy, Turkey is trying to disrupt and undermine this emerging framework. Centred on Greece, Cyprus, Israel, and Egypt, it gained institutional form in January 2020 with the creation of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum in Cairo — deepening Turkey's sense of exclusion from this emerging framework. Even worse for Turkey, there have been a growing number of voices from within the US establishment advocating that the US support this new framework.<sup>35</sup> This has caused unease and consternation in Ankara and, moreover, further convinced Turkish policy-makers that the US is engaged in a soft-containment policy of Turkey in this region. This, in return, has further contributed to the belief in Ankara that Turkey has to operate as a less risk-averse actor while exercising more hard power and taking a more heavy-handed approach in order to protect its interests in this region. Turkey's Libya policy is a manifestation of precisely this thinking.

In a similar vein, through its heightened role in the Libyan conflict, Russia is gaining additional sources of leverage and influence vis-à-vis Europe, as its grip over a major refugee gateway to Europe is strengthening. Likewise, the more that Russian military involvement in Libya has increased, the more Moscow has gained additional sources of influence over the pro-LNA and pro-Haftar Arab countries such as the UAE, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia — Russia has shown aptitude in materialising its geopolitical influence in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Turkey's increasing military role in Libya has relatively heightened Russia's importance for these Arab states as a countervailing force. Plus, Russia's Libya campaign is strengthening its position in Eastern Mediterranean geopolitics, which is an increasingly important sub-region for European security and a major flashpoint of regional geopolitics in the

35 In fact, the bi-partisan bill for the "Eastern Mediterranean security and energy partnership of 2019" (East Med Act), which was tabled jointly by Senators Robert Menendez (Democrat, New Jersey) and Marco Rubio (Republican, Florida) was approved by the Senate and signed into law by US President Donald Trump as part of the National Defense Authorization Act for 2020. This bill commits the US to support the emerging energy and security architecture in the Eastern Mediterranean.

MENA region and the Mediterranean. In addition, through its role, Russia also covets a share of Libya's financial, energy, and reconstruction pie.

There were key developments for Turkish-Russian relations in Libya that took place in 2019. In April 2019, Haftar's LNA launched an offensive to take over Tripoli from the GNA, a crucial ally to Turkey.<sup>36</sup> This offensive was fully supported by the UAE, Egypt, and Russia. As Haftar was making major advances, the GNA's search for regional and international support became more desperate, and yet unsuccessful. Faced with the danger of the GNA falling, which would have removed Turkey from the Libyan scene and undermined its interests not only in Libya, but also in the Eastern Mediterranean, Turkey stepped in to scale-up its military support to the GNA. To that effect, Turkey signed two memorandums of understanding with the GNA in November 2019:<sup>37</sup> the "delimitation of maritime jurisdiction areas" in the Mediterranean Sea, and a security and military cooperation agreement. With the former, Turkey sought to disrupt the emerging security and energy framework in the Eastern Mediterranean, while with the latter, Ankara effectively committed itself to the protection of the GNA, upon which Turkey believes its interests in Libya rest. Operationalising this commitment, Turkey undertook direct military deployment in support of the GNA, including providing military equipment (particularly armed drones) and recruiting and transferring Syrian fighters to Libya to fight on behalf of the GNA. The goal of this policy was to prevent the fall of the GNA, balance the deterrence on the ground, and pave the way for a political process, which Turkey and the GNA would enter from a position of strength.

These factors motivated Turkey to scale-up its profile in the Libyan imbroglio. Another set of factors incentivised Turkey to engage with Russia to explore ways to chart the course of the Libyan conflict.

First, the learning experiences that Turkey and Russia have acquired in Syria through the Astana and Sochi processes as well as by way of the multiple

bilateral deals on Idlib have made them more inclined to seek similar engagements in Libya. In addition, the fact that both countries have increased their military and political footprints in the country, particularly towards the end of 2019, coupled with the good rapport and chemistry between Putin and Erdoğan, have further reinforced this inclination for engagements.

Second, the unwillingness of the US to get involved deeper, coupled with the disunity of the European powers in Libya — particularly the divide between France and Italy — has increased the prominence of the UAE, Egypt, Russia, and Turkey in the conflict. Along these same lines, Turkey was unhappy with the multiple European diplomatic attempts to resolve the conflict, such as the Paris and Palermo conferences on Libya in 2018. Turkey believed that these European initiatives were not taking its interests into account sufficiently. As a sign of its displeasure with the Italian diplomatic effort, Turkey withdrew from the Palermo Conference of 2018 on Libya<sup>38</sup> after it emerged that Egypt was trying to convene a meeting on the subject within the framework of the Palermo Conference, which did not include Turkey, nor did it feature in the official agenda of the event (according to the Turkish side).<sup>39</sup> The relative absence of the US, the disunity of the Europeans (including Turkey's discontent with their policies) on Libya, and the power struggle with the UAE and Egypt has rendered Russia the most convenient actor for Ankara to engage with, despite the competitive nature of their interests and aspirations.

<sup>36</sup> "Libya Crisis: Clashes Erupt South of Capital Tripoli", *BBC News*, 20 April 2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-48000672> (accessed 10 November 2020).

<sup>37</sup> "The Libya-Turkey Memorandum of Understanding: Local and Regional Repercussions" (Washington, DC: Arab Centre, ACRPS Unit for Policy Studies, 2 January 2020), [http://arabcenterdc.org/policy\\_analyses/the-libya-turkey-memorandum-of-understanding-local-and-regional-repercussions/](http://arabcenterdc.org/policy_analyses/the-libya-turkey-memorandum-of-understanding-local-and-regional-repercussions/) (accessed 10 November 2020).

<sup>38</sup> Enis Gunaydin, "Türkiye Libya konferansından çekildi: Krizin arka planı" [Turkey Withdrew from the Conference on Libya: The Background to the Crisis], *Euronews*, 13 November 2018, <https://tr.euronews.com/2018/11/13/libya-da-istikrar-isteyen-rakip-liderler-italya-da-zirvede-bulusuyor> (accessed 11 November 2020).

<sup>39</sup> Emrah Kekilli, "Palermo Konferansı'ndan Türkiye heyeti neden döndü?" [Why Did the Turkish Delegation Withdraw from the Palermo Conference?], *Sabah* (a pro-government daily), 17 November 2019, <https://www.sabah.com.tr/yazarlar/perspektif/emrah-kekilli/2018/11/17/palermo-konferansindan-turkiye-heyeti-neden-dondu> (accessed 11 November 2020).

## Mechanism of cooperation and competition in Libya

Before there was any diplomatic engagement between Moscow and Ankara on Libya, both sides sought to change the military map of the conflict and military consolidation on the ground. In particular, after Turkey signed two memorandums of understanding with the GNA in November 2019, and after the Turkish Parliament authorised<sup>40</sup> the deployment of Turkish forces to Libya on 2 January 2020, Turkey significantly ratcheted up its military support to the GNA. It especially sought to establish the aerial superiority around Tripoli first, and then other parts of western Libya. As a result of this policy, the military dynamics on the ground have changed considerably in favour of the GNA.

These military changes have become particularly more apparent since April 2020. With the capture of cities in western Libya, such as the important coastal cities of Sabratha, Surman, and Al-Ajaylat,<sup>41</sup> the strategic al-Watiya airbase<sup>42</sup> (which was in the hands of fighters loyal to Haftar since 2014), and Tarhuna,<sup>43</sup> the GNA had almost established complete control over western Libya. The GNA's military gains, however, did not deter Russia. In contrast, Russia, along with other external backers of the LNA, doubled down on its military presence in the country, flying fighter jets to Libya via Syria.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, before their diplomatic engagements, both sides sought military reinforcements on the ground and criticised each

other's Libya policy — whereas Ankara criticised<sup>45</sup> the presence of the Russian private security firm the Wagner group, Moscow problematised Turkey's deployment of Syrian mercenaries in Libya, even though Moscow itself recruited Syrian fighters from the regime-controlled areas to fight on behalf of the LNA in Libya.<sup>46</sup>

In parallel to these military consolidation strategies on the ground, Moscow and Ankara have explored ways to launch a bilateral process that would aim to redesign not only the conflict maps, but also the political parameters of a resolution process as well. In fact, prior to the Berlin Conference of 19 January 2020,<sup>47</sup> Moscow and Ankara sped up their efforts to broker a deal on Libya. On 8 January 2020, Putin and Erdoğan called<sup>48</sup> for a ceasefire in Libya. To follow up on this call, Turkey and Russia attempted to broker a ceasefire between the GNA and LNA, however this effort bore no results after Haftar left Moscow without signing the ceasefire agreement on 14 January.<sup>49</sup> Had their efforts proved to be successful, that would have partially hollowed out the Berlin Conference — similar to how the Astana and Sochi processes hollowed out the Geneva process on the Syrian conflict.

## Implications and projections

Despite this failure to launch a bilateral process in Libya, Ankara and Moscow have not given up

40 Zia Weise, "Turkish Parliament Approves Troop Deployment to Libya", *Politico*, 2 January 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/turkish-parliament-approves-troop-deployment-to-libya/> (accessed 12 November 2020).

41 "Libya: Tripoli Gov't Retakes Three Cities from Haftar's Forces", *Al Jazeera*, 14 April 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/4/14/libya-tripoli-govt-retakes-three-cities-from-haftars-forces> (accessed 12 November 2020).

42 Patrick Wintour, "UN-backed Libyan Forces Take Key Airbase from Rebel General", *The Guardian*, 18 May 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/18/forces-allied-to-libyan-government-retake-key-al-watiya-airbase> (accessed 12 November 2020).

43 "Libyan Government Forces Seize Haftar Stronghold Tarhuna", *Al Jazeera*, 5 June 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/6/5/libyan-government-forces-seize-haftar-stronghold-tarhuna> (accessed 12 November 2020).

44 "Russia Deploys Military Fighter Aircraft to Libya", *U.S. Africa Command Public Affairs*, 26 May 2020, <https://www.afcom.mil/pressrelease/32887/russia-deploys-military-fighter-aircraft-to-l> (accessed 12 November 2020).

45 "Pointing to Russian Mercenaries, Turkey's Erdoğan Weighs Joining Fight in Libya", *The Moscow Times*, 12 December 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/12/12/pointing-to-russian-mercenaries-turkeys-erdogan-weighs-joining-fight-in-libya-a68600> (accessed 12 November 2020).

46 "Exclusive: 2,000 Syrian Fighters Deployed to Libya to Support Government", *The Guardian*, 15 January 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/15/exclusive-2000-syrian-troops-deployed-to-libya-to-support-regime> (accessed 12 November 2020).

47 "The Berlin Conference on Libya: Conference Conclusions", Press Release no. 31 (The Press and Information Office of the Federal Government, Germany, 19 January 2020), <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/the-berlin-conference-on-libya-1713882> (accessed 12 November 2020).

48 "Libya Conflict: Turkey and Russia Call for Ceasefire", *BBC News*, 8 January 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-51033277> (accessed 12 November 2020).

49 "Libya Peace Talks in Moscow Fall Short of Ceasefire Deal", *Reuters*, 13 January 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-russia-idUSKBN1ZC0AE> (accessed 12 November 2020).

completely on their military consolidation on the ground, nor on their bilateral diplomatic engagements on approaches to Libya. Especially their military strategies have yielded results on the ground. Since the Berlin Conference, two new trends have increasingly become clear. First, Haftar has been significantly weakened militarily, and his hope of taking over Tripoli has been dashed — a major victory for Turkey's military campaign in this war-torn country.<sup>50</sup> Second, Russia has arguably emerged as the *primus inter pares* among Haftar's external backers — which includes, apart from Russia, the UAE, Egypt, France, and Saudi Arabia. Both of these developments have been advantageous for Turkey. The rationale for the former development is clear. When it comes to the latter, of all of Haftar's backers, Russia is the one that Turkey has developed a working relationship with, both cooperatively and competitively, in recent years.

### **The anti-Russia posture of the US in Libya serves Turkish interests.**

However, in spite of these positive trends, there are limits to any Turkish-Russian engagement on Libya. The military effectiveness of each on the ground is unlikely to translate into corresponding bilateral diplomatic effectiveness on the crisis for several reasons. First, in Syria: Putting aside the US, the Astana trio of Turkey, Russia, and Iran are the only external players with a capacity to change the military dynamics on the ground in any significant manner. In contrast, in Libya, there are more regional and international players that can undermine any Turkish-Russian bilateral deal on the conflict, and hence more spoilers. Therefore, even if there are more Turkish-Russian declarations or roadmaps to be announced over Libya in the coming period, these declarations will not amount to what can be described as an Astana process for Libya, one that can design the political and military map of the conflict in Libya in the same way the original Astana process did in Syria. Second, Turkey will continue with its double-track policy with the US and Russia on Libya. In this respect, the anti-Russia posture of the US in

Libya serves Turkish interests. Plus, Ankara does not have any major point of friction with Washington regarding Libya as it does with Syria (over the Kurdish PYD/YPG). Unless, there is a policy revision in the US on Libya that Ankara might find inimical to its interests, Turkey will be careful not to antagonise the US — especially given the interconnection between the Libyan crisis and the power play between Turkey and a set of countries in the Eastern Mediterranean, where additional US support for the anti-Turkey camp could make a difference. Therefore, while Turkey is engaging with Russia on Libya, it also wants to capitalise on the spectre of Russia's growing influence on Europe's doorstep to lobby for Western support for its position, particularly the support of the US.

Instead of trying to attain its goals through bilateral engagements with Russia, at present, Turkey is trying to achieve these goals through military consolidation on the ground and diplomatic flexibility. In terms of military dynamics, it appears that Sirte, the gate to the oil crescent in Libya, has become a new dividing line between the GNA's and the LNA's areas of control and the Turkish-Russian (and for that matter Egypt's and the UAE's) spheres of influence. It therefore appears that Turkish-GNA military momentum has run out of steam. At this stage, Turkey will focus on the consolidation of its presence and influence in the area that the GNA controls and on translating military gains into political, economic, and strategic gains as much as — and as soon as — possible. To that effect, Ankara has signed a plethora of agreements with the GNA in the areas of economy, finance, energy, business, and security — whether or not most of these deals will materialise is another matter. In any change of government or change in the structure or composition of power in Libya, Turkey will certainly strive to make sure that the agreements that it has signed with the GNA remain intact. Likewise, it will push for its allies to maintain their roles and influence in any new power reconfiguration in Libya. At the security level, Turkey's primary concern will be to prevent instability and infighting in Tripoli and Misrata. At the strategic level, Turkey will continue to upgrade the capacity of its air (al-Watiya) and naval (Misrata) bases. On a parallel track, Turkey will also double down on its security-sector reform, institution-building, and army-building efforts in western Libya.<sup>51</sup> In this way, Turkey believes that it

<sup>50</sup> Declan Walsh, "In Stunning Reversal, Turkey Emerges As Libya Kingmaker", *The New York Times*, 21 May 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/21/world/middleeast/libya-turkey-russia-hifter.html> (accessed 14 November 2020).

<sup>51</sup> Galip Dalay, *Turkey's Libya Policy: New Flexibility, New Goals*, ISPI Commentary (Milan: Italian Institute for International

can institutionalise its influence, and hence ensure that its influence remains in the country for the long term. However, the lack of a committed international ally will be one of Turkey's major weaknesses. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise if Turkey experiences a significant gap in results between its military gains and its political influence and gains in the country down the road. Relatedly, it is plausible to anticipate that Turkey's influence in Libya may begin to wane.

Finally, for most of the Libyan imbroglio, Turkey and Russia have been playing the catch-up role, either with Western policy or due to developments on the ground. In this sense, their policies have been more reactive. However, in the latest phase of this conflict, both actors have tried to proactively redesign and redefine the conflict map, mainly militarily, but partially politically as well. And the increase in their influence has come at the expense of Western actors in the Libyan crisis.

Political Studies [ISPI], 27 May 2021), <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/turkeys-libya-policy-new-flexibility-new-goals-30609> (accessed 2 June 2021).

# Nagorno-Karabakh: Cooperation? Not in My Backyard

Although Nagorno-Karabakh is not situated in the MENA region, the crisis there has revealed important features about Turkish-Russian engagements in various conflict zones throughout the Middle East and beyond. First, this crisis has illustrated how different subjects and conflicts, irrespective of their geographic locations, have become closely intertwined in Ankara-Moscow relations. Second, this crisis has also shed light on how Russia has approached engagements with Turkey in the Middle East and the post-Soviet space differently in a qualitative manner.

## Context

On 27 September 2020, fighting broke out between two former Soviet republics: Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh and its seven surrounding areas, which belong to Azerbaijan according to the UN, but they have been administered by Armenia since the early 1990s. This conflict has put Russia in a tight spot, as it is unfolding between Armenia, which is a member of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation, and Azerbaijan, another close partner of Moscow. In contrast, Turkey saw an opportunity to increase its influence in the South Caucasus — a region that Ankara sees as being in its immediate neighbourhood — through the very same conflict. To that effect, Turkey threw its full and active support behind Azerbaijan. This support has taken several forms.

At the military level, as Azerbaijan has executed heavily dronised warfare, Turkey has been one of the major suppliers, alongside Israel, of military hard-

ware and drones to Azerbaijan.<sup>52</sup> It is highly likely that Turkey has also provided direct technical expertise in operating these drones. Second, Turkey has reportedly sent<sup>53</sup> Syrian fighters to aid the Azerbaijani side and protect strategic installations and infrastructures. The presence of foreign fighters in this conflict and in the South Caucasus in general would be highly threatening to Russia, given the proximity of the area to the country. Third, according to several reports, Turkey kept a number of F-16 warplanes in the Azeri city of Ganja as a deterrence following a joint exercise in July and August of 2020.<sup>54</sup> On the military side, Turkey has maintained deniability without necessari-

<sup>52</sup> For a take on how Turkey transferred its drone warfare capacity to Azerbaijan, see Can Kasapoglu, *Turkey Transfers Drone Warfare Capacity to Its Ally Azerbaijan* (Washington, DC: The Jamestown Foundation, 15 October 2020), <https://jamestown.org/program/turkey-transfers-drone-warfare-capacity-to-its-ally-azerbaijan/> (accessed 18 November 2020). Also, many believe that Turkey played the central role in Azerbaijan's victory; for such a perspective see, Mark Galeotti, "Russian Ceasefire Deal in Nagorno-Karabakh Marks Slow, Painful End of Empire in the South Caucasus", *The Moscow Times*, 10 November 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/11/10/russian-ceasefire-deal-marks-slow-painful-end-of-empire-in-the-south-caucasus-a72001> (accessed 18 November 2020).

<sup>53</sup> Ragip Soylu, "Exclusive: Azerbaijan, Armenia 'Near Ceasefire Deal' on Nagorno-Karabakh", *Middle East Eye*, 8 November 2020, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/nagorno-karabakh-ceasefire-deal-azerbaijan-armenia> (accessed 18 November 2020).

<sup>54</sup> Patrick Keddle, "What's Turkey's Role in the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict?" *Al Jazeera*, 30 October 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/10/30/whats-turkeys-role-in-the-nagorno-karabakh-conflict> (accessed 18 November 2020).



ly denying the above-mentioned activities.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, if necessary, Turkey could justify its military assistance to Azerbaijan by citing the Strategic Partnership and Mutual Assistance Agreement, which it signed with Baku in 2010 and covers broad areas for security cooperation between the two sides.<sup>56</sup> Finally, the Turkish-supported Azerbaijani military campaign in this recent conflict was geared towards undermining the previous status quo in the frozen conflict — despite the fact that the international community, including the UN, has recognised the Nagorno-Karabakh and its seven surrounding areas as belonging to Azerbaijan, these areas had been under Armenian control until this latest fight.

At the diplomatic level, Turkey was isolated. It reached out to Russia to launch a bilateral track, similar to the Astana process, on this conflict. Turkey would have preferred this to gain primacy over the Minsk Group of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe,<sup>57</sup> which was set up to find a peaceful resolution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and is co-chaired by the US, Russia, and France — the Minsk Group was completely sidelined during this latest fight and the diplomatic process that followed. However, given that the conflict was taking place in the post-Soviet space, Russia, at least initially, did not have much motivation for a bilateral track with Turkey in the form of a new Astana process on the conflict — particularly not a process in which Moscow and Ankara would have been seen as being on equal-footing in leading it. Unlike Turkey's desire to launch a process in which it would be seen as the backer of Azerbaijan and Russia of Armenia, Moscow preferred to play the role of big brother to both countries — it did not want to forsake its influence over Azerbaijan. In any case, an Astana-style process would have further increased and legitimised Turkey's role in the conflict and in what is regarded to be Russia's backyard, which is something that Russia wanted to avoid.

In spite of this, given the fact that this conflict is between two countries that are close to Moscow,

Turkey's military escalation strategy in Nagorno-Karabakh worked in favour of Turkish interests but against Russian interests. The logic for this escalation strategy was clear: If Russia took a back seat while Azerbaijan continued to recover more lands, then Turkey's gambit would pay off. Azerbaijan would be grateful for Turkey, and its influence in the country would grow<sup>58</sup> — this is largely what happened. If Russia had stepped in more forcefully on the side of Armenia, then it would have risked alienating Azerbaijan, which again would have pushed Baku closer to Ankara.<sup>59</sup> For Moscow, the best-case scenario was the limited accommodation of Azerbaijan, and then to once again freeze the conflict. Meanwhile, for Turkey, de-freezing and upsetting the status quo were the preferred options, as Ankara saw the previous status quo inimical to its interests.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, in Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia was in a more difficult position when it came to engaging in a balancing act between different sets of interests and concerns.

Thus, this conflict put Turkish-Russian relations to the test while also placing Moscow in an uncomfortable position.

## Mechanism of (non)cooperation

For Turkey, the victory would not have solely meant military gains, it would have also meant political parity with Moscow in the conflict. To that effect, from early on in the conflict, Turkey strived to work with Moscow to deal with it. However, Turkey's outreach to Russia to create a bilateral track on

<sup>58</sup> For a similar take, see Maxim Suchkov, "In Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia Faces an Unenviable Task", *The Moscow Times*, 16 October 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/10/16/in-nagorno-karabakh-russia-faces-an-unenviable-task-a71778> (accessed 18 November 2020).

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> See Galip Dalay's comments in *Reuters*: "Turkey's logic in almost all corners of the map is disruption. Anything that undermines the status quo is good for it, because the previous status quo was seen to counter its interests. In Nagorno-Karabakh there was a frozen conflict in which it remained in Armenia's hands. Turkey wants to undermine this game even if it cannot fully determine it" given Russia's traditional influence in the region", see "In Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict, Erdogan Eyes Turkey's 'Place in World Order'", *Reuters*, 7 October 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/armenia-azerbaijan-erdogan-analysis-int-idUSKBN26S0HZ> (accessed 20 November 2020).

<sup>55</sup> As Ozgur Unluhisarcikli of the German Marshall Fund Ankara office would put it, communication with the author, November 2020.

<sup>56</sup> Daria Isachenko, *Turkey–Russia Partnership in the War over Nagorno-Karabakh*, SWP Comment 53/2020 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, November 2020).

<sup>57</sup> For an overview on the mandate of the OSCE's Minsk Group, see "OSCE Minsk Group", <https://www.osce.org/mg> (accessed 18 November 2020).

Nagorno-Karabakh has borne no fruit. Russia's initial attempts to broker a ceasefire between the warring sides did not include Turkey. At the request of Turkey, the first Putin-Erdoğan conversation on the conflict occurred on 14 October 2020.<sup>61</sup> Only hours before this phone call, Russia had struck pro-Turkish Syrian rebels in Idlib.<sup>62</sup> Russia continued to pursue a policy of putting pressure on Turkey through Syria throughout the Karabakh conflict. For instance, on 26 October 2020, Russian fighter jets attacked a training camp that belongs to the Faylaq al-Sham group of the Turkish-created Syrian National Army in the Jabal Duwayli area of Idlib, which is only 10 kilometres from the Turkish border.<sup>63</sup> This attack killed around 80 rebels.<sup>64</sup> Just as Nagorno-Karabakh was Russia's soft spot, Syria was Turkey's. By putting pressure on Ankara through Syria, Moscow was trying to balance its vulnerabilities with Ankara. Moreover, by pointing to the reported transfer of Syrian mercenaries to the scene of conflict, Russian officials were indirectly accusing Turkey of bringing the menace of terrorism to the region.<sup>65</sup>

Moscow was therefore clear with its red lines and displeasure with Turkish policy. Again, for the diplomatic track, it consistently referred to the Minsk Group framework for the resolution of the conflict and called upon Turkey to make its contribution to the political solution through this framework, as

61 "President Erdoğan, Russian President Putin Talk over Phone", *Directorate of Communications: Presidency of the Republic of Turkey*, 14 October 2020, <https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/english/haberler/detay/president-erdogan-russian-president-putin-talkover-phone> (accessed 20 November 2020).

62 See the released images of this strike: <https://twitter.com/VeraVanHorne/status/1316368603252510722>, also see in Suchkov, "In Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia Faces an Unenviable Task" (see note 58).

63 "Russian Strikes Kill at Least 78 in Opposition's Training Camp in Syria's Idlib", *Daily Sabah*, 26 October 2020, <https://www.dailysabah.com/world/syrian-crisis/russian-strikes-kill-at-least-78-in-oppositions-training-camp-in-syrias-idlib> (accessed 20 November 2020).

64 Ibid.

65 "Russia Warns That Nagorno-Karabakh Could Become Islamist Militant Stronghold", *Reuters*, 6 October 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-armenia-azerbaijan/russia-warns-that-nagorno-karabakh-could-become-islamist-militant-stronghold-idUKKBN26R1EJ>; <https://tass.com/politics/1217181> (accessed 20 November 2020); also see "Telephone Conversation with President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan", *President of Russia*, 14 October 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64204> (accessed 20 November 2020).

Turkey is also a member of the group, but not one of its co-chairs.<sup>66</sup> Corollary to this, later on, when Russia started to engage Turkey more seriously on the subject, it did so in a non-structured and non-publicised manner — without undermining the primacy of the Minsk Group framework, at least in its discourse. As manifested in the ceasefire deal<sup>67</sup> that Russia brokered between Armenia and Azerbaijan on 9 November 2020, Russia met Turkey only halfway in terms of Ankara's aspirations. It had to recognise Turkey's role, but it did not accord it parity in the conflict.

## The missing part in the ceasefire deal

Prior to the ceasefire deal,<sup>68</sup> Moscow and Ankara had established a parallel bilateral track on the conflict. By pointing to the existence of a parallel Turkish-Russian track and the ensuing ceasefire, many drew correlations between this ceasefire and the multiple ceasefire deals that Turkey and Russia had signed over Idlib. However, the Nagorno-Karabakh ceasefire deal and the multiple Idlib deals are instead marked by their differences. First, apart from representing a major setback for Armenia, this deal partially satisfies the Azerbaijani side, puts Russian boots on the ground, and creates a new temporary status quo, hence re-freezing the conflict. This is in line with Russian interests. However, the more the conflict thawed and the more the old status quo was

66 "Telephone Conversation with President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan", *President of Russia*, 14 October 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64204> (accessed 20 November 2020).

67 "Main Points of Nagorno-Karabakh Peace Deal", *The Moscow Times*, 10 November 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/11/10/main-points-of-nagorno-karabakh-peace-deal-a72003> (accessed 20 November 2020).

68 Majority sees this deal as the best possible outcome that Russia could have achieved given the circumstances, for instance see, Alexander Gabuev, "Viewpoint: Russia and Turkey — Unlikely Victors of Karabakh Conflict", *BBC News*, 12 November 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-54903869> (accessed 21 November 2020); but a minority disagree with this judgement, see, Mark Galeotti, "Russian Ceasefire Deal in Nagorno-Karabakh Marks Slow, Painful End of Empire in the South Caucasus", *The Moscow Times*, 10 November 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/11/10/russian-ceasefire-deal-marks-slow-painful-end-of-empire-in-the-south-caucasus-a72001> (accessed 21 November 2020).



undermined, the better the situation became for Turkey. In contrast, Russian interests lay with the partial accommodation of Azerbaijani's aspirations and the re-freezing of the conflict based on a new status quo. In this respect, the ceasefire deal is broadly speaking in accordance with Russia's initial projected outcome. Second, despite Turkey being the main external backer of Azerbaijan during this conflict, the deal that concluded this latest fight was signed by Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia. Turkey is not a signatory to this agreement. Russia hence maintained primacy during the diplomatic phase. Third, unlike in Idlib, peacekeeping missions (military patrols) will be solely conducted by Russia — there will be no joint patrols, hence no Turkish boots on the ground. Turkey will only send observers. The details and mechanism of this observation mission are not clear yet and will be sorted out bilaterally between Turkey and Russia. But in any case, peacekeeping is essentially Russia's show, with a ceremonial role being assigned to Turkey. Thus, asymmetry and hierarchy mark this deal — in favour of Russia — in terms of the roles of Turkey and Russia in the diplomatic resolution of this conflict, as manifested through the Moscow ceasefire agreement.<sup>69</sup>

Despite this, Russia could not disregard Turkey's role entirely. The parallel track that Moscow and Ankara established for the conflict reflects this. However, to Ankara's chagrin, Moscow was careful not to let this parallel track morph into a structured process on the conflict and hollow out the Minsk Group mission — in the same way that the Astana process restructured the Syrian conflict and hollowed out the Geneva process. This conflict and the ensuing ceasefire deal revealed four dynamics. First, Turkey forcefully inserted itself into the Armenian-Azerbaijani dispute on behalf of Baku, and it increased its role and profile in the changing regional order of the South Caucasus. Second, Russia maintained its primacy in the region. Third, the West's role and influence suffered a blow as a result of this conflict and the ceasefire arrangement that followed. Finally, whereas in Syria, Turkish-Russian cooperation and engagement served both countries' national interests and increased their influence — at the expense of that of Western powers — in Nagorno-Karabakh (in the post-Soviet space or Russia's "near abroad"), the increase in Turkish influence would come not only at the

expense of the West, but also at the expense of Russia's influence as well. This is why Russia resisted launching a structured bilateral process on the conflict with Turkey, even though it could not disregard Turkey's role completely.

<sup>69</sup> See Galip Dalay: <https://twitter.com/GalipDalay/status/1326123814909059073>.

# Managing the Asymmetry and Interdependency in the Relationship

The process that started in Syria has resulted in Turkey and Russia developing closer relations on many issues, including Ankara buying Russian-made S-400 missile systems,<sup>70</sup> exploring ways to launch a process on Libya,<sup>71</sup> and signing a deal for a natural gas pipeline project (TurkStream) to carry Russian gas through Turkey to Europe.<sup>72</sup> Despite these growing areas and instances of cooperation between the two sides, whenever there have been disagreements between Moscow and Ankara, Moscow has certainly not shied away from drawing its red lines. Likewise, despite the structured engagements on Syria, talks on Libya, and non-structured *modus vivendi* on Nagorno-Karabakh, Turkish-Russian relations are built on mistrust and geopolitical rivalries. From the Black Sea to the Caucasus, and the Middle East to the Balkans, there is not a single issue or crisis for which Turkey and Russia are on the same side of the table.<sup>73</sup>

In other words, although the levels of engagement and interdependencies in Turkish-Russian relations are fast increasing, there is no sign of a decrease in

the incompatibilities of their geopolitical aspirations, nor in the inbuilt deficit of trust in this relationship. The features of these relations, in return, elicit questions about the nature of this interdependency and the (a)symmetry in these relations. To be more precise, many regard this interdependency as being imbalanced and asymmetric, meaning that one side is more dependent or has more to lose than the other in the event of a breakdown of relations, hence the “exit cost”<sup>74</sup> of this relationship is greater for one side than the other. It is implied that Turkey is more dependent on Russia in this relationship. By extension, in the event of a rupture, Turkey is more likely to incur a greater cost than Russia. For instance, in the event of a breakdown in Syria, Turkey can significantly drive up the cost of a confrontation for Russia and the regime, but Russia on its end can push millions of people from Idlib into Turkey, debilitate the Syrian opposition, and facilitate a greater role for the Syrian Kurds in the political process on Syria.

This exit cost analysis is not solely informed by the geopolitical repercussions of a rupture, but by the economic ones as well. To clarify, in Turkish-Russian economic exchanges, Turkey provides Russia with vegetables, textiles, construction business, and other finished goods. In return, it gets natural gas and oil, nuclear reactors, millions of tourists, and recently the

**70** “Turkey Signs Deal to Get Russian S-400 Air Defence Missiles”, *BBC News*, 12 September 2017, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-41237812> (accessed 27 November 2020).

**71** “No: 156, 22 July 2020, Joint Statement on the Turkish-Russian High-Level Consultations on Libya (Ankara, 22 July 2020)”, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey*.

**72** “Russia and Turkey Sign Deal to Build TurkStream Gas Pipeline”, *Reuters*, 10 October 2016, <https://de.reuters.com/article/russia-turkey-gas-pipeline/update-1-russia-and-turkey-sign-deal-to-build-turkstream-gas-pipeline-idUKL8N1CG4Z9> (accessed 27 November 2020).

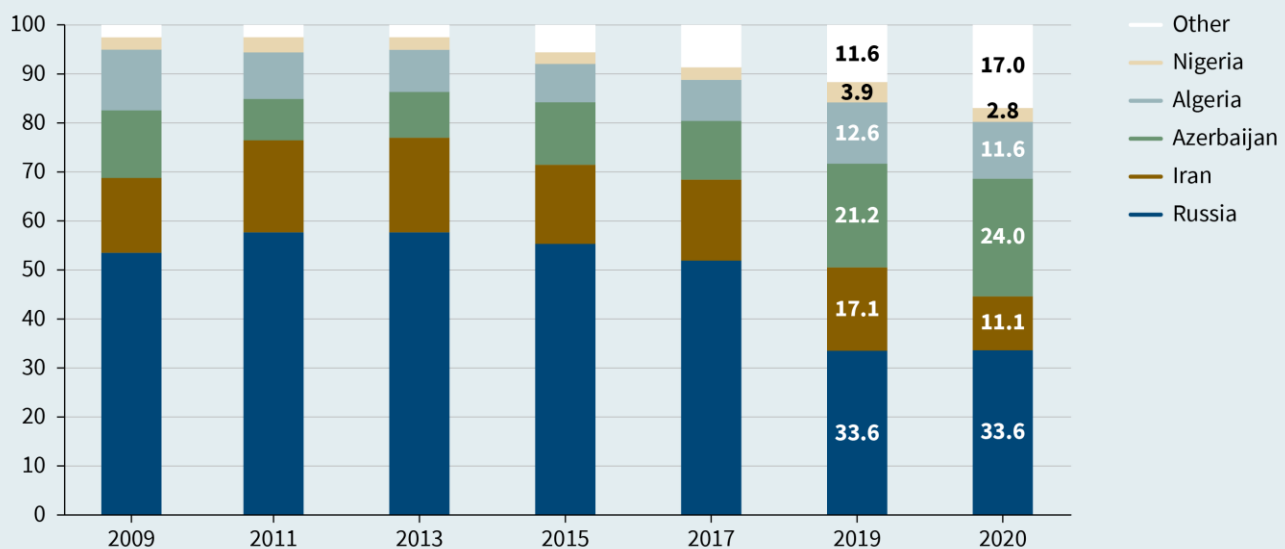
**73** Galip Dalay, “Turkey and Russia Are Bitter Frenemies”, *Foreign Policy*, 28 May 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/05/28/turkey-and-russia-are-bitter-frenemies/> (accessed 27 November 2020).

**74** For a detailed analysis on the subject, see Tolga Demiryol, “Türkiye – Rusya Arasında Asimetrik İlişki ve Bağımlılık” [Turkey and Russia’s Asymmetric Relations and Dependency], *Perspektif* (A quality opinion page), 5 May 2020, <https://www.perspektif.online/turkiye-rusya-arasında-asimetrik-iliski-ve-bagimlilik/> (accessed 27 November 2020). On the question of interdependency, see Seckin Kostem, “The Political Economy of Turkish-Russian Relations: Dynamics of Asymmetric Interdependence”, *Perceptions* 13, no. 2 (2018): 10–32.

Figure 1

**Country Breakdown of Turkey's Natural Gas Imports**

in percent



Source: EMRA

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S-400 missile systems from Russia. In the event of a breakdown of relations, Russia would have a relatively easier time replacing Turkish products than vice versa.<sup>75</sup> Thus, the exit cost for Russia is comparatively lower. Therefore, the structure of their economic relations, coupled with the nature of their geopolitical engagements, indicates the unequal and asymmetric character of Moscow-Ankara interdependencies and relations.

However, the nature of Turkish-Russian interdependencies, including its asymmetric character, should not be seen as a static element — asymmetry is dynamic and subject to change. Indeed, this is what is happening. Turkey has engaged in what can be termed “dependency reduction” on Russia, both geopolitically and economically (or structurally), which in return bears policy implications for the future.

### Reducing Turkey's structural dependency on Russia in the energy field

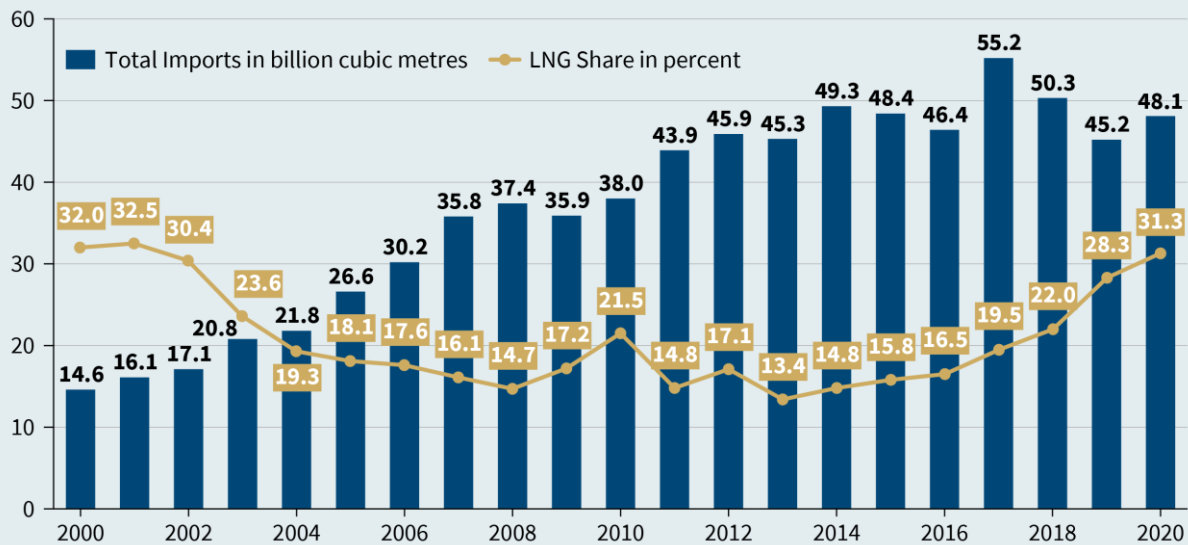
Through energy explorations, energy purchases from friendlier countries, and the diversification of shares of different energy forms in its overall energy (gas) imports, Turkey is aiming to reduce its strategic vulnerabilities and energy dependency. For a long time, Russia and Iran occupied the top two positions, respectively, regarding Turkey's natural gas imports. These are the two countries with which Turkey has competitive regional aspirations. For this reason, Turkey has pursued a policy of reducing its dependency on these countries in the energy field.<sup>76</sup> Figure 1 clearly shows the changes in the country breakdown of Turkey's natural gas imports. In line with this trend, during the first half of 2020, Turkey's natural gas imports from Iran and Russia declined by 44.8% and 41.5%, respectively, compared to the same period

<sup>75</sup> Demiryol, “Türkiye — Rusya Arasında Asimetrik İlişki ve Bağımlılık” (see note 74).

<sup>76</sup> Galip Dalay, *Turkey, Europe, and the Eastern Mediterranean: Charting a Way out of the Current Deadlock*, Policy Briefing (Doha: Brookings Doha Center, January 2021).

Figure 2

## The LNG Share of Turkey's Overall Gas Imports



Sources: EMRA, BOTAŞ, PETFORM through Atlantic Council

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in 2019.<sup>77</sup> In contrast, Turkey's imports from Azerbaijan increased by 23.4% during the same period compared to the first half of 2019.<sup>78</sup> Azerbaijan now occupies the largest share of Turkey's natural gas market. Through its energy exploration activities in the East Mediterranean and Black Sea regions, Turkey wants to further reduce its natural gas dependency on its rivals. Similarly, the share of liquefied natural gas (LNG), which Turkey imports from sources as diverse as Qatar, the US, Algeria, and Nigeria, in its overall level of gas imports is rapidly increasing. At a time when the share of Russian gas in Turkish gas imports plunged from 52% in 2017 to 33% in 2019,<sup>79</sup> the

share of LNG rose from 19.5% to 29% during the same period.<sup>80</sup> Figure 2 clearly illustrates how the share of LNG is fast increasing in Turkey's overall gas imports in recent years. These trends in the Turkish energy market are set to continue. Long-term gas contracts between Turkey and Russia are due for renewal towards the end of 2021.<sup>81</sup> With Turkey's decreasing dependency on Russian gas, coupled with the diversification of its gas import sources and the availability of competitive prices, Turkey will have a better negotiating position compared to before.

### Geopolitical dependency reduction on Russia

Similar to its efforts to downsize its energy dependency on Russia, Ankara has also engaged in what can be termed a geopolitical balancing act vis-à-vis Moscow.

<sup>77</sup> Nuran Erkul Kaya, "Turkey's Gas Imports from Russia and Iran Fall Sharply", *Anadolu Agency*, 24 August 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/turkey-s-gas-imports-from-russia-and-iran-fall-sharply/1951397> (accessed 27 November 2020).

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> "Russian Share of Gas Imports Falls As Turkey Turns to Cheaper LNG", *Daily Sabah*, 5 June 2020, <https://www.daily-sabah.com/business/energy/russian-share-of-gas-imports-falls-as-turkey-turns-to-cheaper-lng#:~:text=Turkey%20imported%2045.21%20billion%20cubic,cubic%20meters%20of%20natural%20gas> (accessed 27 November 2020).

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Dimitar Bechev, *Liquefied Natural Gas: A Game Changer for Turkey?* (Washington, DC: Middle East Institute, 31 July 2020), <https://www.mei.edu/publications/liquefied-natural-gas-game-changer-turkey> (accessed 27 November 2020).

In recent years, the fast improvement in Turkish-Russian relations has been accompanied by a corresponding deterioration in Turkish-Western relations. This has resulted in a lopsided Turkish foreign policy when it comes to its relations with major powers. In fact, instead of making Turkey strategically more autonomous — as pro-government pundits claim in Turkey — the way that Turkish-Russian relations are being conducted is making Turkey strategically more vulnerable. In other words, the decline in Turkish-Western relations has increased Turkey's dependency and strategic vulnerabilities vis-à-vis powers such as Russia, but also China. Turkey has searched for ways to address its strategic dependency and vulnerabilities vis-à-vis Russia.

First, Turkish-Ukrainian relations are fast expanding. Both countries signed a military cooperation agreement on 16 October 2020.<sup>82</sup> Geopolitically, this deal and the overall close cooperation between Turkey and Ukraine aim to counterbalance Russia's influence in the Black Sea region. Given the trajectory of recent years, it is plausible to anticipate that Ankara-Kiev relations will continue to improve.

Second, in Libya, Turkey appears to be continuing with its double-track policy with the US and Russia. Turkey is likely to avoid pursuing a policy that would antagonise the US at this stage. In this conflict, Turkey is happy with the US' anti-Russia policy, which Ankara believes serves its interests. Unless the Joe Biden administration adopts a radically different position on this conflict, Turkey will be mindful of the US position in Libya. Therefore, unlike in Syria — where Turkey's strained relations with almost all the Western powers (especially with US CENTCOM) have increased Turkey's strategic vulnerabilities vis-à-vis Russia — in Libya, the degree of Turkey's dependency and vulnerabilities vis-à-vis Russia is limited for two primary reasons: First, Russia does not have the same level of primacy in Libya as it does in Syria. Second, unlike in Syria, Turkey has better working relations with the US (particularly the Africa Command) as well as several European countries such as Italy.

Third, through its policy on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Turkey wants to balance the strategic vulnerabilities in its relations with Moscow, among other goals. As Syria is Turkey's soft spot, Nagorno-

Karabakh was and partially still is Russia's. Russia can threaten Turkey using Syria and drive up the costs for Turkey there, the same way Turkey tried using Nagorno-Karabakh against Russia. Corollary to this, Turkey will continue with its policy of coaxing Azerbaijan more into its orbit, which will further strengthen Turkey's standing in the Black Sea and South Caucasus vis-à-vis Russia. If the Central Asian vector of Turkish foreign policy gains more prominence in the new period, this will have a similar effect on Turkish-Russian relations.

In sum, Turkish-Russian relations, both economically as well geopolitically, are asymmetric in favour of Moscow. Conscious of this asymmetry — and the strategic vulnerabilities that result from it — Ankara has pursued policies to address this challenge, hence reducing its dependency and vulnerabilities vis-à-vis Russia. However, the dismal state of Turkish-Western relations makes this task harder to achieve.

<sup>82</sup> "Turkey, Ukraine Sign Military Cooperation Agreements", *Voice of America*, 16 October 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/europe/turkey-ukraine-sign-military-cooperation-agreements> (accessed 29 November 2020).

# How to Account for Turkish-Russian Cooperation

In spite of the dynamism and developments in Turkish-Russian relations since 2015, we cannot extrapolate that the same level of cooperation will continue, provided that Turkish-Western relations do not experience a rupture. First, as discussed in the specific cases above, Turkish-Russian relations are already facing limitations. Second, Turkey is already engaged in downsizing its dependency on and geopolitical vulnerabilities vis-à-vis Russia. Third, the structural limitations of these relations are highly likely to be more visible and pronounced going forward.

To explain these increasingly close relations in recent years, the analysis mainly features Turkey's motives. What is perplexing is not that Russia would want to form closer relations with Turkey regionally or bilaterally; the benefits of such engagements for Russia is clear. On top of economic and energy interests (including Russia building Turkey's first nuclear power plant) and given Turkey's membership in NATO, undermining NATO's cohesion and creating more friction between Ankara and its NATO partners serve Russia's interests. For instance, as a NATO member, Turkey's purchase of the S-400 systems confers more prestige on these systems and generates more tension between Turkey and the US — both of these developments serve Russia well. Similarly, cooperation with Turkey gave more legitimacy to Russian-designed processes in the conflict zones, most importantly in Syria. The list of benefits that Russia has accrued from its engagements or cooperation with Turkey goes on. Plus, unlike Turkey, Russia does not have to pay a cost for forming increasingly close relations with Turkey. In contrast, from being removed from the F-35 fighter jet programme to the CAATSA sanctions to the deepening crisis in its relations with the West, Turkey has to pay a heavy price for its close relations with Russia and purchasing the Russian-made S-400 missile systems.

Given the price involved, how to account for Turkey's motivations in establishing increasingly close

relations with Russia? Broadly speaking, there are three dominant explanatory accounts for these relations from Turkey's perspective: political (discontent with the West), systemic, and personal agency. These explanatory paradigms shed light on the different dynamics of these relations, but none is suited to provide a comprehensive picture.

## Discontent with the West as the glue of their relations

The concept of an “axis of excluded”<sup>83</sup> has been utilised as one of the explanatory paradigms that has been adopted by certain analysts to account for the deepening of Turkish-Russian relations. The basic argument behind this approach is that, despite structural differences and contrasting worldviews<sup>84</sup> between Turkey and Russia, both actors are opting for closer relations as a result of their shared frustrations with Western and US policies being directed towards them.<sup>85</sup> Applying this approach to the Middle Eastern context, this reading would see Turkey's displeasure with US policy in the region as being the major driver for Ankara to seek better relations with Russia. Indeed, the US — or the West in general — is the “invisible” third party in most Turkish-Russian engagements, particularly when it comes to Middle East policy.<sup>86</sup> The state and health of Turkish-US relations has a direct impact on the nature of Turkish-Russian

<sup>83</sup> Fiona Hill and Omer Taspinar, “Turkey and Russia: Axis of Excluded?” *Survival* 48, no. 1 (2006): 81–92.

<sup>84</sup> Pavel Baev and Kemal Kirişçi, *An Ambiguous Partnership: The Serpentine Trajectory of Turkish-Russian Relations in the Era of Erdoğan and Putin* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 2017).

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Galip Dalay and E. Fuat Keyman, *Turkish-U.S. Strategic Decoupling through the Prism of Syria*, On Turkey, Policy Brief (The German Marshall Fund of the United States, February 2019).



relations. At least, this is the case from Turkey's perspective. Relatedly, the opacity of US policy — or the perceived loss of its strategic clarity — the nature of its local partnerships in Syria (particularly its evolving relationships with the Syrian Democratic Forces, the backbone of which is formed by the YPG, which is affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party, PKK), and regional alliances (the US being highly supportive of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel's regional designs and visions in recent years) have further driven wedges between Turkey and the US. When it came to Donald Trump, there were two effects of his regional policy on Turkey. On the one hand, Trump was highly lenient vis-à-vis Turkey and President Erdoğan — including green-lighting Turkey's military operation into north-eastern Syria and shielding Turkey for a long time from the CAATSA sanctions for purchasing Russian-made S-400 missile systems (he imposed these sanctions in the last days of his presidency after being forced to by Congress). On the other hand, Trump's broader regional policy, which was premised on supporting the fledgling partnership between Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Israel, was running counter to Turkish interests.

These factors have also created extra incentives for Turkey to seek better relations with Russia and alternative realignments. But a level of caution is warranted here. The debate on Turkey's supposed Eurasianist turn usually comes to the fore as a reaction to Turkey's deteriorating relations with the West. It is clear that the institutional and elite ownership of Turkey's Western relations has significantly weakened. Traditionally, the foreign ministry and the military have provided strong institutional ownership for Turkey's Western orientation. Likewise, foreign and security policy elites, but not solely them, have played decisive roles in sustaining these relationships. The roles and outlooks of these actors and institutions have undergone major changes in Turkey. As a result, there have been institutional and elite deficits when it comes to keeping Turkey's previous Western orientation. Yet, this deficit in Turkish-Western relations has not translated into institutional and elite ownership of Turkish-Russian relations. As it stands, Turkish-Russian relations are neither strongly pushed by society, the elite, or institutions within Turkey. Structurally, these relationships are still premised on relatively weak foundations.

In this regard, Turkey's governing elites often justify Turkey's closer relations with Russia and China by referring to the fashionable, but largely nebulous,

concept of searching for strategic autonomy in Turkish foreign policy. This means that Turkey will attain its goals much more effectively through a balancing act between different centres of power. Despite such framing, the way it is operationalised, strategic autonomy effectively means making Turkey less dependent on the West rather than making it an autonomous actor in international affairs altogether.<sup>87</sup> Moreover, given the growing lopsidedness in Turkey's relations with Russia and China (in favour of them) versus the US and Europe, the way that this search is being conducted is increasing Turkey's strategic vulnerabilities rather than its resilience and autonomy. Turkey's silence on China's persecution of the Turkic Uighur Muslims and its downplaying of Russia's role in the Russia-Syria regime killing<sup>88</sup> of 36 Turkish soldiers in Idlib on 27 February 2020 illustrate Turkey's growing vulnerabilities vis-à-vis these two powers. Turkey is partially trading its dependency on the West with dependency on Russia and China, over which it has even less leverage.<sup>89</sup>

### Adaptation to systemic changes in international affairs

Turkish leaders' reading of international affairs coupled with systemic changes in international politics, particularly in the Middle East, are additional drivers of the close relations between Moscow and Ankara. One of the central assumptions of Turkey's ruling elites about the international system is that it is no longer Western-centric, if not post-Western. This reading sees the global order as being destined to be multipolar, which in return provides regional powers such as Turkey with more room for manoeuvre. From this perspective, Turkish interests will be better

<sup>87</sup> Galip Dalay, *Turkey and the West Need a New Framework*, Policy Paper (The German Marshall Fund of the United States, June 2020).

<sup>88</sup> "Syrian and Russian Forces Were Flying Together: Turkey's UN Ambassador", *Duvar English*, 29 February 2020, <https://www.duvarenglish.com/diplomacy/2020/02/29/radar-tracks-show-syrian-and-russian-forces-were-flying-together-during-the-deadly-attack-that-killed-36-turkish-soldiers-in-idlib-turkish-ambassador-at-the-un> (accessed 3 December 2020).

<sup>89</sup> Dalay, *Turkey and the West Need a New Framework* (see note 87).

served through a geopolitical balancing act between different centres of powers.<sup>90</sup>

Several systemic changes in global politics, but more importantly in the Middle East, have further strengthened these readings and assumptions. First, Turkish-Chinese relations are not yet at the same level as Turkish-Russian relations. However, Ankara is trying to cultivate closer economic ties with China while maintaining complete silence on China's persecution of Uighur Muslims as the price for these ties. In any case, the government appears to see more opportunities than threats in the rise of China. Second, at the Middle Eastern level, the US is downsizing its commitments and footprint – not necessarily its capabilities – in regional politics. Even though Trump implemented this strategy in a more disorderly fashion, this policy precedes him and had started during Obama's presidency. This partial US withdrawal has created a power vacuum in the MENA region and the Mediterranean, which has led to fierce power rivalries among regional and international actors. Corollary to this, the nature of the Middle East's relations with international powers has undergone a major change and gained a multi-polar character.<sup>91</sup> Russia's role in regional security and China's in the regional economy have relatively increased. Similarly, the role of regional powers in shaping regional affairs has also relatively increased. Not only powers such as Turkey, Iran, and Israel, but also countries such as the UAE and Qatar have scaled-up their presence and prominence in regional politics.

All these systemic changes were fully on display in the three conflict zones (Syria, Libya, and the Nagorno-Karabakh) where Turkey and Russia were involved. To be more precise, the US was not willing to get involved deeply with these conflicts. Russia, in contrast, was willing to play a much more forceful role in the same conflicts. Likewise, Turkey, similar to other regional states, has intervened directly and militarily in these conflicts. In the end, close engagements between Turkey and Russia in the Syrian conflict occurred around mid-2016, almost a year after Russia's direct military involvement in the conflict, by which time it became clear that the US was not

interested in any expansive or deeper entanglement in the Syrian imbroglio beyond the war on terror and its presence in north-eastern Syria. On top of the Turkish government's reading of, or assumptions about, international politics, this perspective thus sees Turkish-Russian engagements on the conflict zones in the Middle East and beyond as an outcome of the systemic changes in regional politics, political realism, and geopolitical imperatives.

## Geopolitics and the personalities of leaders in Ankara and Moscow

The role of the leading actors, namely Erdoğan and Putin, needs to be contextualised and situated within a historical trajectory while analysing these bilateral relations. In the end, it is not clear what will transpire, as Turkish-Russian relations are essentially Putin-Erdoğan relations – institutional agency in this relationship is still weak. Policy-wise, this distinction does not mean much at present – in the end, these two actors are the ultimate decision-makers in their respective countries. However, this distinction, or lack thereof, is important in projecting the future course of Moscow-Ankara relations. Despite the differences in political upbringings, formative experiences, and styles, Erdoğan and Putin share certain qualities. As two strong men, both leaders hold the ultimate say in their respective countries' foreign, defence, and domestic policies and are representatives of the sociological transformations that their countries have undergone – at least this is the case in Turkey's context.

Despite their portrayals in the media, neither leader is an aberration in their country's political history. But both leaders' quest for status and recognition in international politics and their displeasure with their "status" vis-à-vis the West is in line with the historical course of both countries. Post-Erdoğan, in geopolitical terms, is unlikely to be anti-Erdoğan in Turkey.<sup>92</sup> Despite the potential differences in style and discourse, the likely alternatives to Erdoğan down

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Galip Dalay, *The Middle East After Trump: A Reshuffling of the Cards?* (Berlin: Robert Bosch Academy, January 2021), <https://www.robertboschacademy.de/en/perspectives/middle-east-after-trump-reshuffling-cards> (accessed 16 February 2021).

<sup>92</sup> Dalay, *Turkey and the West Need a New Framework* (see note 87). Ivan Krastev and Gleb Pavlovsky previously made similar comment about Russia that "post-Putin Russia" is unlikely to be "anti-Putin". Ivan Krastev and Gleb Pavlovsky, *The Arrival of Post-Putin Russia* (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 1 March 2018), [https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/the\\_arrival\\_of\\_post\\_putin\\_russia-02032018.pdf](https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/the_arrival_of_post_putin_russia-02032018.pdf) (accessed 2 March 2021).



the road might put forward a starkly different domestic political vision for Turkey, but it is unlikely that they will be completely different when it comes to Turkey's geopolitical ambition, its "status anxiety" regarding the West, and its quest for international recognition – but they can obviously adopt different styles and strategies in pursuing similar policy goals, which can make major differences as regards the tension in Turkish-Western relations. In this respect, in geopolitical terms, Erdoğan's geopolitical disposition is partially a reflection of Turkey's quest for status and its accumulated grievances and discontent with the West – although, this disposition has certainly been coloured and flavoured by Erdoğan's ideological convictions, political experience, domestic political goals, personal style, and authoritarian turn in Turkey.

**It is the credibility of the commitment and predictability, not trust, that define relations between Putin and Erdoğan.**

Arguably, despite the differences, a similar case can be made about Putin and his meaning for Russia's political history and geopolitical vision. In this respect, "post-Putin Russia" is unlikely to be "anti-Putin".<sup>93</sup> Russia's quest for status in international affairs and opposition to Western/NATO geopolitical projections will not change following Putin's departure from power. Therefore, the flamboyance and eccentricity of these leaders should not render us oblivious to the historical and political currents behind the formation of their geopolitical dispositions and visions. The difference is that, whereas Turkey mainly seeks parity with the major European powers (Germany, France, and Britain) and a redefinition of its relationship with the US, Russia seeks parity with the US. Moreover, regarding itself as part of the broader cultural West,<sup>94</sup> Russia seeks a redressing of its relationships with the West.

<sup>93</sup> Ivan Krastev and Gleb Pavlovsky, *The Arrival of Post-Putin Russia* (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 1 March 2018), [https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/the\\_arrival\\_of\\_post\\_putin\\_russia-02032018.pdf](https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/the_arrival_of_post_putin_russia-02032018.pdf) (accessed 2 March 2021).

<sup>94</sup> During an online meeting of the World Economic Forum (2021), Klaus Schwab posed the following question to Russia President Vladimir Putin: "How do you see the future of European-Russian relations?" Vladimir Putin: "You know there are things of an absolutely fundamental nature such as

Being part of the institutional West, Turkey is pursuing a redefinition of its place largely within the West, not solely in relation to the West. This last point is also crucial to understand what Turkey, at least under the current government, is giving up and what it is holding onto in its relations with the West. Turkey is giving up on what can be depicted as the "idea of the West", which historically meant that the West served as a reference point for Turkey's socio-political transformation and economic modernisation and "the idea of the indispensability of the West", which traditionally meant Turkey filtering all its other major geopolitical engagements and orientations through the Western lens.<sup>95</sup> However, Ankara is not giving up on the institutions of the West, be it NATO or the Customs Union with the EU. Instead, it aspires to redefine its role and position within these institutions and the broader Western framework.

Finally, in spite of the personal chemistry between Erdoğan and Putin, Turkish-Russian relations are not trust-based. Instead, they are premised on historical mistrust and consciousness. However, the predictability, delivery, and credibility of the commitments that they make to each other provide the glue of these relations.<sup>96</sup> Therefore, it is the credibility of the commitment and predictability, not trust, that define relations between Putin and Erdoğan as well as Moscow and Ankara.

our common culture. Major European political figures have talked in the recent past about the need to expand relations between Europe and Russia, saying that Russia is part of Europe. Geographically and, most importantly, culturally, we are one civilisation. French leaders have spoken of the need to create a single space from Lisbon to the Urals. I believe, and I mentioned this, why the Urals? To Vladivostok..." For the full interview, see "Session of Davos Agenda 2021 Online Forum", Website of the President of Russia, 27 January 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64938> (accessed 8 March 2021).

<sup>95</sup> Dalay, *Turkey and the West Need a New Framework* (see note 87).

<sup>96</sup> In his remarks, Putin usually emphasises Erdoğan's predictability and his keeping promises as an important basis for improving relations between Moscow and Ankara. "[H]e [Erdoğan] keeps his word like a real man. He does not wag his tail. If he thinks something is good for his country, he goes for it. This is about predictability", see website of the President of Russia, "Vladimir Putin's Annual News Conference", Press Release (Moscow, 17 December 2020), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/64671> (accessed 11 March 2021).

# Outlook

Many analyses on current Turkish-Russian relations are disproportionately informed by the engagement in Syria. Undeniably, Syria is central to the present shape of these relations. However, it is also a unique crisis, and the dynamics of these relations are unlikely to be applicable in other contexts. Instead, the future prospects of Turkish-Russian relations, particularly within the context of the Middle East, will be shaped – or more accurately experience limitations – by a variety of conjectural as well as structural factors. On top of Middle Eastern-specific factors, Moscow-Ankara relations are also encumbered by a set of broader strategic constraints.

## Limits of the Turkish-Russian partnership in the Middle East

First, Turkey and Russia have a different space for manoeuvring in the Middle East due to their historical relations and past track records in the region. Despite its policy on behalf of certain actors in the Middle East – with arguably the exception of the Assad regime – Russia in effect entertains no special relationship with any actors in the region. Russia keeps the doors open to all Middle Eastern leaders and countries – for instance, in Libya, even though it is the main backer of the LNA, it has also established relations with the GNA. Though it has largely been associated with the counter-revolutionary camp in the Arab world since the Arab Spring, it still makes efforts to avoid falling into the traps of the Middle East's infamous fault lines: Shia – Sunni; Iran – the Arab world; Israel – Iran; Palestinians – Israelis. Russia therefore escapes becoming part of the camp politics in the region. Turkey, on the other hand, has decidedly become part of certain camps in regional divides since the onset of the Arab uprisings. It was the leading regional power supporting the Arab uprisings. It established strong relations with the pro-Arab Spring actors and political Islamic groups in the region. During the early stages of the Arab Spring, the major defining character of the regional divide concerned

where regional actors stood in relation to these uprisings. Countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain were strongly opposed to these uprisings – with the exception of the Syrian uprisings, which they supported in its early phases – and strived to turn the clock back to the pre – Arab Spring period in the region. In contrast, Turkey, Qatar, and certain non-state actors such as the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated groups in the region were the main champions of regional change, except in Bahrain, where the Saudi-led Arab Gulf coalition suppressed the Shia-majority Bahraini protestors. This divide drove wedges between Turkey and the anti – Arab Spring camp in the region.

Second, there is a fundamental incompatibility between Russia's and Turkey's preferred regional partners – theoretically, this can be a strength and mean complementarity, but in practice it has not proved to be the case. Unlike the Soviet Union's foreign policy, the present-day Middle East policy of Russia is not premised on a certain ideology – putting aside its aversion to popular protests and regime changes. Yet, stating that Russian regional policy is non-ideological is not the same as saying that Russia's policy is colourless. One of the main features of Russia's regional policy is its secular orientation. In contrast, Turkey has developed and maintained strong relations with the region's political Islamic forces since the onset of the Arab uprisings.

Third, the natures of the political economies of Turkey and Russia are also constraining factors in bilateral relations. Russia pursues policies that will reflect the interests of a major energy-exporting country, whereas Turkey represents a major energy-importing country in its regional policy. Whereas Russia favours high energy prices, Turkey's interests lie in low energy prices, particularly given Turkey's huge current account deficit, which is partially caused by Turkey's increasing energy needs. This incompatibility in the two countries' political economies will have some implications on their regional policies and interactions.

Fourth, the Middle East has a different significance for Turkey and Russia in terms of their national interests and priorities. As reflected in the Russian Foreign Ministry's Foreign Policy Concept Papers in 2013<sup>97</sup> and 2016,<sup>98</sup> the Middle East does not seem to be a priority region — unlike Europe and Asia, or at least not on par with Europe and Asia — for Russia's foreign policy. In these papers, the Middle East is placed towards the end of the section on "Regional Priorities".<sup>99</sup> This demonstrates how much importance Russia attaches to the Middle East as a region. It appears that Russia usually sees the Middle East through a global lens,<sup>100</sup> and this region gains or loses importance in Russia's foreign policy as a result of its other foreign policy priorities and visions: be it as an arena to assert Russia's global power status, or as a context through which to deal with Russia's problem of radicalism at home or in its near abroad much more effectively, or as a weapons market. Arguably, besides the imperatives of fast-changing developments on the ground in the Middle East, according such a relatively low level of importance to the region in comparison with Asia and Europe can partially account for why Russia seems to pursue such short-term, opportunistic, issue, or agenda-focused and transactional policies towards the region. Furthermore, Russia appears to have carefully calculated the scale and depth of its regional involvement. Its targeted, low-cost, and limited-level engagements have proved to be effective thus far. For instance, Russia's regional activism has a clear geographic focus. It appears that Russia is particularly interested in strengthening its position in the Eastern Mediterranean, as reflected in its policies towards Syria, Egypt, Libya, and Cyprus. Likewise, Russia covets the arms market of the Gulf states as well as the Gulf's potential investment in the Russian

economy,<sup>101</sup> along with desires for coordinating energy prices with Middle Eastern oil and gas producers in order to keep them high. Politically, Russia wants to maintain the political "status quo" in the region — Moscow looked at the Arab uprisings through the same lens that it had approached the Colour Revolutions in its immediate neighbourhood and saw both processes as threatening and needing to be suppressed. In spite of such features of its policy, Russia's Middle East policy does not seem to have a long-term perspective or overall framework. Russia is therefore short-termist, transactional, and uncommitted — with no special relationships with any party (albeit with the possible exception of the Syrian regime) — and this puts a certain cap on what Russia can do and achieve in the region.

Turkey, in contrast, sees the Middle East primarily through national and regional lenses. In the last decade, this region has sapped most of the energy, time, and resources from Turkish foreign policy. The meaning and significance of the Middle East has undergone several changes for its foreign policy. Prior to the Arab uprisings, Turkey had a largely economy-focused foreign policy — premised on soft-power tools — for the region. Given its ability to speak with almost all the actors in the region, Turkey tried to carve out a unique position for itself through mediation efforts established between the region's quarrelling parties: be they Israel and Syria; different Palestinian factions; Lebanese groups; Pakistan and Afghanistan; or regarding Iran's nuclear programme. Moreover, Turkey pursued a more active and higher profile policy within the multilateral institutions of the region, such as the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, the Gulf Cooperation Council, and the Arab League.<sup>102</sup> Turkey believed that its strengthened regional role would increase its international profile and role as well. With the onset of the Arab uprisings, Turkey championed a new regional order and developed hegemonic aspirations towards the region — believing that this process would inevitably give birth to a new regional order in which Turkey envisioned itself playing a leading role. During this time, Turkey

**97** Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation* (Moscow, 2013), [http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/122186](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/122186) (accessed 27 January 2021).

**98** Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation* (Moscow, 2016), [http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/2542248](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/2542248) (accessed 26 January 2021).

**99** Ibid.

**100** Stephen Blank, *The Foundations of Russian Policy in the Middle East* (Washington, DC: The Jamestown Foundation, 2017).

**101** Alexey Khlebnikov, *Russia Looks to the Middle East to Boost Arms Exports* (Washington, DC: Middle East Institute, 8 April 2019), <https://www.mei.edu/publications/russia-looks-middle-east-boost-arms-exports> (accessed 29 January 2021).

**102** Galip Dalay and Dov Friedman, "The AK Party and the Evolution of Turkish Political Islam's Foreign Policy", *Insight Turkey* 15, no. 2 (2013): 124, 132.

expanded the scope of its regional policy dramatically. Its foreign policy discourse and activism acquired a region-wide scale. The capacity—discourse gap of Turkey's regional policy widened significantly during the same period. Yet, with the unravelling of the Arab Spring, the rise of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, the emergence of a de facto Syrian Kurdish region along the Turkish-Syrian borders, and the crumbling in 2015 of Turkey's Kurdish peace process, which started in 2013, plus the ensuing bloody conflict between Turkey and the PKK, Turkey has once again recalibrated its regional policy. This recalibration has also taken shape in the form of the militarisation of Turkish foreign policy, which has adopted a coercive diplomacy<sup>103</sup> to attain its foreign policy goals in places as far flung as Syria, Iraq, Libya, the Eastern Mediterranean, and Nagorno-Karabakh.

At this stage, apart from the power struggles with the anti—Arab Spring countries, Turkey's regional policy has partially become an extension of its domestic policy and reflects its growing national security prerogatives. The Kurdish issue, in particular, has significantly shaped the contours and content of its regional policy, especially towards its immediate Middle Eastern neighbourhood. In the broader region, the political and geopolitical divide between Turkey and a set of anti—Arab Spring countries such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt has had a major impact on Turkish foreign policy. As a corollary, Turkey sees the Middle East predominantly with a security-centric perspective. Despite such changes with regards to the meaning and significance of the Middle East in overall Turkish foreign policy, the Middle East will remain a priority region for Turkey for various reasons. In a similar vein, despite fluctuations in Turkey's regional profile, it will remain a major regional power. It will continue to play an influential role in its immediate neighbourhood in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean in particular.

Finally, Turkey and Russia have had different standings on the regional status quo. At the regional level, after the Arab uprisings, Turkey operated as a revisionist power. It supported the overthrow of authoritarian regimes and the establishment of a new regional order, developing closer relations with the pro-change forces in the region. Despite the fact that in recent years, Turkey has adopted a much more

cautious stance on the continuing waves of protests in the Middle East, this does not change the overall picture. In contrast, Russia has operated as a status quo power in the region, displaying clear preferences for regional authoritarian strong men such as Sisi and Assad. It was suspicious towards the Arab uprisings and supported the incumbent regimes. Such a divergence of preferences as regards the regional status quo created a strategic incompatibility between the two powers' regional visions.

## Broader strategic constraints of Turkish-Russian relations

On top of these Middle Eastern-specific constraints, Ankara-Moscow relations also suffer from a lack of institutional and elite ownership, broader geopolitical incompatibility and historical consciousness, and divergent approaches to the regional and international order.

First, these bilateral relations have historical roots, including amities, rivalries, and enmities, and they have never been confined to just one specific context, such as Syria or Libya. Turkey is Russia's biggest economic partner in the entire MENA region.<sup>104</sup> Until recently, Russia was Turkey's largest energy provider.<sup>105</sup> Therefore, despite the centrality of Syria, and in a limited way Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh, Turkish-Russian relations have always gone beyond Syria. This is particularly the case today. Yet, these relations are not sufficiently institutionalised, lack elite ownership (particularly in bureaucratic and political terms), and are fraught with strategic incompatibilities from the perspectives of both powers.

Second, if we were to talk of any “grand strategy” of the Ottoman Empire in its last few centuries, it would arguably be the following: pursue policies that prevent the collapse of the empire and engage in different arrangements with major European powers to balance and contain Russia, and prevent Russian designs vis-à-vis the empire.<sup>106</sup> There has always been

**103** Saban Kardas, *Understanding Turkey's Coercive Diplomacy*, On Turkey, Policy Brief (The German Marshall Fund of the United States, August 2020).

**104** Eugene Rumer, *Russia in the Middle East: Jack of All Trades, Master of None* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2019).

**105** Kaya, “Turkey's Gas Imports from Russia and Iran Fall Sharply” (see note 77).

**106** See Hasan Kosebalaban, *Turkish Foreign Policy: Islam, Nationalism and Globalisation* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); also see Dalay, “Turkey and Russia Are Bitter Frenemies” (see note 73).

a geopolitical consciousness among both the Ottoman and republican elites as regards Russia's geopolitical ambitions and power projection. In the end, it was the Soviet demand for territory and special rights in the management of the Turkish Straits in 1945 that motivated Turkish elites to actively, if not desperately, seek security partnerships with the West.<sup>107</sup> This search later translated into Turkey's energetic push to become a member of NATO, which eventually succeeded in 1952. In a similar vein, denying Russia a significant presence to the south of Turkey's borders or the Eastern Mediterranean has been a continuous policy position — from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish republic. In recent years, it appears as if Turkey has lost this strategic clarity with regard to its policy towards Russia's geopolitical expansion. At present, Russia is not only Turkey's northern neighbour, it is also Turkey's southern and north-eastern neighbour. Russia's growing presence in the Eastern Mediterranean is reducing Turkey's strategic autonomy and room for manoeuvre there. The loss of strategic orientation in Turkish foreign policy, coupled with the troubles in Turkey's traditional alliance structure, is keeping Turkey from sufficiently appreciating the geopolitical challenge that Russia poses to Turkey as a result of it being present on almost all of its borders. Yet, once some level of calm and normalcy prevails in Ankara, it is inevitable that Turkey will be disturbed by Russia's strong military presence in its neighbourhood. Turkey is likely to see this presence both as a geopolitical challenge and a threat.

Third, Turkey and Russia have had different standings on the international status quo. At the international level, despite enjoying its UNSC seat and desiring to keep the UN design as it is, Russia still behaves as a revisionist power. It is particularly seeking changes to the post — Cold War international order and parity with the US. In contrast, despite Turkey's political parlance of the last decade, which has demanded a more prominent international role and status for the country, it has essentially been a status quo power at the international level. It has asked for the reform of international institutions

(particularly the UN) and the international order,<sup>108</sup> but it has also been very consciously demanding the maintenance of both the post — Second World War and post — Cold War international order and institutions, though in a reformed way, given that Turkey was a beneficiary of this order. In the same vein, despite Turkey's search for new partners at the international level, in the foreseeable future, Russia does not have the capacity — nor China as well for that matter — to replace Turkish-Western relations. However, as a result of the increasingly close relations between Ankara and Moscow (coupled with the growing gap between Turkey and the West, both in the domestic and foreign policy realms), the nature, meaning, and content of Turkish-Western relations are undergoing major changes, and Turkey's place in the broader Western system is increasingly being questioned. Going forward, these developments, in turn, will trigger more calls both in the West and in Turkey to redefine the framework and meaning of Turkish-Western relations, as the Cold War framework between Turkey and the US as well as the accession framework of Turkish-European relations increasingly appear to be ill-suited to the present realities.

Finally, Turkish-Russian cooperation in the Middle East and beyond has been partially facilitated by the US withdrawal from — or the downsizing of its regional commitments and Europe's absence from — the MENA region. However, developments at the broader international level, a new administration in the US, rising tensions between Ukraine and Russia, and the partial reinvigoration of European and UN diplomacy on the Libyan crisis indicate that Turkey will face more constraints and higher costs for its hitherto geopolitical balancing act between the West and Russia.

**107** Some scholars contest this official historiography. For such a contestation, see Behlül Özkan, "The 1945 Turkish-Soviet Crisis", *Russia in Global Affairs* 18, no. 2 (2020): 156 — 187.

**108** Berdal Aral, "The World Is Bigger than Five': A Salutory Manifesto of Turkey's New International Outlook", *Insight Turkey* 21, no. 4 (Winter 2019): 71 — 95.

## Abbreviations

CAATSA	Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act
CENTCOM	US Central Command
GNA	Government of National Accord
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
LNA	Libyan National Army
LNG	Liquefied Natural Gas
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party
PYD	Democratic Union Party
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UN	United Nations
UNSC	United Nation Security Council
US	United States
YPG	People's Protection Units

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